



MARY CALMES

A MATTER
OF TIME

VOL. 1

For all my wonderful fans
who asked when this book
would be in print and
for Elizabeth who made it a reality.

A Matter of Time: Vol. 1

by Mary Calmes

Book One

* * * *

Chapter One

After careful thought and consideration I have come to the conclusion that things happen to me for two reasons. First, I have a terrible habit of tuning out in the middle of a conversation. I'll hear the beginning, start thinking about what I'm going to do later, and then come back in time to hear the end. This gets particularly dicey when I'm getting directions, because you never want to ask someone to repeat something they have already gone over in specific detail. This is why I often end up in some spooky neighborhoods after dark. I'm winging it. Second, I am not the most discriminating person on the planet. So when a friend of mine asks me to do them a favor, I'll usually just do it without asking a lot of questions. Not that I would be listening to the whole explanation anyway, since like I said, I'm probably the poster child for ADHD, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, unless you're my boss or a really hot guy.

The night my friend Anna called me, sobbing on the other end of the phone, I immediately went into nurture mode and walked out of the club, so I could hear her better. There is no way to hear anything over trance music, so I had her wait to spill her guts. I was happily surprised to hear that she was finally leaving her husband. She had stayed with me or her sister many times, after he'd hit her for the millionth time.

It's hard to watch your friends come to class wearing oversized sunglasses, and makeup that's so thick it could have been applied with a putty knife. Everyone knew her husband beat her, I just never knew how bad or constant it was. I lost track of her after graduation, when she moved to the suburbs, but when she called I was right back there, instantly in that place where I was ready to help any way I could. I told her that of course, I would do whatever she needed.

In all the movies on the Lifetime channel, which I watched the last time I was home sick—hung over and hurling—the wife always has to go back to get her kid's stuffed animal from the house of horrors she lives in. But before she can put the pedal to the metal and point the late-model station

wagon with the faux-wood paneling into the sunset, she has to return for Boo-Boo Bunny or Mr. Snuggles, or a teddy bear that has been loved so hard and long it now resembles an iguana. Anna didn't have any kids, but what she did have was her beagle, George. She couldn't go back, but neither could she leave without her partner in crime. They had apparently executed all manner of petty crimes and misdemeanors against her husband over the years. From peeing in shoes—George's part—to hiding miscellaneous items—Anna's part—they had made Brian Minor's daily existence annoying, in exchange for the abuse he had handed out with fist and word.

It had given her some degree of satisfaction knowing that, one day, vengeance would be hers. She knew she'd been a coward to not just leave, but she suspected her husband was far more sinister than he let on. So Anna was finally ready to call it a day with Brian but he would have suspected something, and probably killed her, if she'd tried to take her dog. She needed me to get her puppy to make a clean break of it. Because I wanted her out of there so badly, and because I would have gone back for my own dog were he still alive, there was no way to say no.

After leaving my friends dancing at a club on Halsted, I took a cab and headed out to the suburbs. I tried never to leave the city and had only been outside of downtown Chicago on two previous occasions. On the way over there I tried to remember where in the house she had told me the dog was, but since I hadn't heard that part it was useless to try and dredge the information from my brain. I figured when I got to the house, which I had only been to once, it wouldn't be hard to find a beagle.

The problem turned out to be finding the house itself. I forgot the address and I didn't want to call Anna back and look like I hadn't been listening. Even though I hadn't. And by then enough time had gone by that if I had called her she would have wondered why I just didn't call her earlier, so...

the cabbie and I took the tour of La Grange until I remembered the street in an energy-drink-fuelled vision after I made him stop at a gas station. It had only taken two hours to get to her huge three-story apparition. I asked the driver to wait for me and he said he'd rather drink Clorox. I understood. I

can be exhausting at times. I watched him drive away before I headed toward the house.

The front door swung open when I went to ring the doorbell. I called for Brian and got no response. When I called for George, I heard muffled barking from a room to the left. It was the study, and as soon as I walked in I realized the noise was coming from behind the curtain. When I checked, there was another door behind it. If you weren't looking for it you would have never seen it, but there was no missing the high-pitched puppy whining. When I opened the door, George was all over me, whimpering, dancing, his whole little body moving with his wagging tail, trying like mad to claw through my jeans. I bent to pet him, and when I did, without meaning to, without even thinking about it, I stepped into the office.

The door was open but behind the curtain, so even though I had never intended to hide, I ended up doing just that. It was only for a second and I was ready to step back out when I heard the crash. George yelped and retreated behind my leg.

I peeked around the drape and saw a man lying on top of the remains of the heavy glass coffee table that I had walked by seconds earlier. He was covered in blood and mumbling softly.

There are those moments that seem like a strobe light is going off in your head. You see pieces of things but not the whole picture. I saw the shattered glass, the burnished black leather shoes of the guys standing on the royal blue Persian rug; I saw the polished marble floors and Brian holding a gun on the guy. It doesn't sound like it does in the movies. When a gun goes off, there's no boom, it's more of a firecracker pop. I saw the guy jerk, heard him scream out "no," and watched Brian unload the gun. It was fast, like a jump cut in a movie, and it was over. All the guys took a turn spitting on him, and it was at that moment that two things happened simultaneously. First, my phone rang, which does "Karma Chameleon," and second, George bolted through the drape. I lunged for him and caught his collar but not in time to stop my forward momentum. It was like being on stage. I came out from behind the curtain. Like *ta-dah!*

My eyes swept the room; I saw every face before I settled on the one I knew the best, the guy holding the empty gun.

"Jory!" Brian roared, and because I have no fight reflex whatsoever, I went immediately to flight. I yanked on George's collar and whipped him back into the other room. As I dived after him I heard the shots and Brian screaming my name. He'd never been all that crazy about me but we were definitely in another place by that moment.

I got my legs under me and ran. I yelled for George and he was running along beside me as fast as his little legs would carry him. I saw a guy in front of me but instead of slowing down I sped up. When he pulled his gun, I dropped to my knees and slid halfway across the polished wooden floor. It would have been very cool if I weren't running for my life at the time. He fell on top of me, but I got untangled and ran for the front door. When I threw it open, I was faced with Darth Vader.

"Get down," he ordered me, and what sounded like a baseball hit him in the chest.

I dove for the ground and he stepped on me and then somebody else kicked me and then my arm got yanked so hard I thought my shoulder was dislocated. Outside, someone dragged me to my feet before pulling me into the street where like a hundred police cars were, lights flashing everywhere. It was cold and I registered that before anything else. There were more shots and I got shoved back down to my knees on the ground. I lost my balance because I got bumped and pushed and then somebody covered me in a jacket that weighed like a thousand pounds. I fell back and George was on me, licking my face as I tried to breathe. I was winded and when I finally grabbed the dog and hugged him so he'd stop I realized four men were standing over me.

Not one looked pleased. One guy in particular looked like he wanted to strangle me right there in the middle of the street.

"Two years of undercover work blown in seconds," he told me icily.

What to say? "Sorry?"

"Who the fuck are you?" he snarled at me. The scowl looked permanent.

I coughed twice. My ribs hurt. "Jory Keyes."

"What are you doing here, man?" one of the others snapped at me.

I tried to take in some air. "I came to get the dog," I told them, which was really all the explanation I had. It had seemed like such a nothing task at the time.

"The dog?"

Their expressions were priceless and even lying there on the pavement I had to smile.

* * * *

If I didn't watch so much TV, real life wouldn't be so disappointing. As it was, I was expecting the interrogation room from *Law & Order* and the reality was nothing like that.

It wasn't dark, it was really bright, and the metal table was bolted to the floor. The chairs were cold and metal without any padding, and just basically had no atmosphere or character to speak of. It was just plain anticlimactic and so I was bored. I had an ice pack on the back of my head, a Sprite for my stomach, which had gotten queasy when my adrenaline ran out, and a pen and paper so I could write down everything I remembered. I had recounted what I'd seen to a lot of different people ten different ways. When Anna had come to get George, they wouldn't let me see her.

She was being taken somewhere safe right that second. I couldn't blame them. I didn't want her to get hurt either. My head was down on my folded arms when the door opened. So many people had been in and out that I didn't even look up.

"Mr. Keyes."

I rolled my head sideways and realized that Detective Sam Kage was back. He was, I'd decided, the one that hated me the most. I had screwed up his undercover investigation with my need to be rescued. He and his fellow vice detectives had to break cover, turn their guns on Brian Minor, and save me.

The only luck they had all night was that Brian had actually killed a man in cold blood and they had an eyewitness to that... me. He was going to jail for a long time. It was just as good, they said, as racketeering, bribery, blackmail, and extortion. First-degree murder had its own time frame that worked for them.

"Sit up and look at me."

I lifted my head off my arm and leaned back in my chair, staring at him. He had changed out of his Kevlar body armor and was now in a shirt and tie. He was trying to pull off mild-mannered police detective but I wasn't buying it. I'd seen the beast inside of him already. The others, his tall but balding captain, his dark sort of eastern-European-looking partner and the two others, who looked like poster boys for the Marine Corps, all of them were nicer than Detective Kage. I wanted anyone else but him in the room with me.

"Mr. Keyes, you—"

"What kind of gun is that?" I asked, pointing to his holster.

"What?"

"What kind of gun?"

"Why?"

I shrugged. "I was just wondering."

"It's a Glock 22."

"Okay," I yawned, letting out a deep sigh. That exchange had maybe killed a second and a half. What was next on the agenda?

"Tell me about yourself, Mr. Keyes."

I looked back at him. "Whaddya wanna know?"

"Where are you from?"

"Kentucky," I said flatly because I usually said LA or Miami just to make it sound more glamorous, but I figured he was looking for the truth, being a police officer and all.

"How long have you been in Chicago?"

"I moved here when I was seventeen."

"You run away from home?"

"Nope. I graduated from high school when I was seventeen. See my birthday's in January so I started school at four instead of—"

"Can we move on?"

Rude much

"Well?"

"Rude much?" I said out loud instead of just thinking it in my head.

"Sorry, go on."

"Never mind," I snapped at him. I hated getting caught rambling on to people that didn't give a crap. It was mortifying.

"Just talk already, sorry for interrupting."

He wasn't sorry, but I figured if I were waiting for actual sincerity I'd be sitting there a long time. I was better off just letting it go. What did it matter to me if he cared or didn't?

"Okay, so I got here and got a job and I've been here ever since."

"Uh-huh. So what, your family's still there in Kentucky?"

"No," I breathed out. "There was only my grandmother and she died when I was ten."

"Where are your folks?"

"I have no idea."

"You have no idea where your father is."

He said it like he didn't believe it. "No. I don't even know who he is. It doesn't even say on my birth certificate, and my mother left when I was like three months old or something.

Her name was... is Mandy, but that's all I can tell you. She never came back so I've never met her."

"I see. So you were raised by your grandmother, and when she died, what?"

"I went into foster care."

He looked straight at me. "Any horror stories?"

"No, I was lucky. I lived in a group home from the time I was ten to the time when I graduated from high school."

"You close to any of those people?"

"No. Why?"

"Why not?"

"I dunno. You're acting like I have a character deficit or something."

"Was I?"

"It was implied," I assured him.

He grunted.

"It was a group home, Detective. It wasn't the whole mother/father deal. It was like a dorm. I wasn't close to anyone. They could have cared less if I was there or not."

"Did that bother you?"

"I don't need some bullshit psych eval here, all right? It was what it was, it doesn't matter."

He nodded. "So you graduated and what?"

"I bought a bus ticket from Lexington, Kentucky to Chicago, Illinois."

"And so you got here and then what happened?"

"Why is this important?"

"I just need some background, Mr. Keyes, if you don't mind."

Did I mind? "Okay, so I got here and got the job I have now. I worked all through college and when I was done I decided to stay instead of doing something else."

"And where do you work?"

"I work at Harcourt, Brown, and Cogan," I said proudly.

"By your tone I'm assuming I'm supposed to know what that is."

I felt my brows draw together.

"What's with the look?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No I'm not kidding."

"You're serious?"

"I said I was."

"Huh."

"What is whatever you said?"

"Harcourt, Brown, and Cogan... it's one of the premier architectural firms in the city."

"Uh-huh."

"My boss, Dane Harcourt, he's the main architect. Miles Brown does interior design and Sherman Cogan is the landscape architect."

"What does main architect mean?"

"He designs houses."

He stared at me a long minute. "Does he?"

"Yes. He's very famous."

"If he's so famous why haven't I ever heard of him?"

I scoffed at him. "I bet the people you haven't heard of could fill a book, Detective."

"You're a punk, you know that?"

I smiled at him. "Particularly nice comeback, Detective."

"So that's it, no family, just you?"

"Just me."

"This'll be easy then."

"What will?"

"Making you disappear."

"I'm sorry?"

"Protective custody, witness protection... are you starting to get it?"

I shook my head. "Just tell me when I can go home."

His eyes narrowed more than they already were. "Are you stupid?"

I just waited, staring at him.

"Mr. Keyes, you are never going home again. You are going into the witness protection program. Federal marshals will be here in the morning to transport you to—"

"Yeah, right," I got up. I was tired of being treated like I did something wrong. "I'm going now. I'm beat and I gotta go to work in the morning."

"Mr. Keyes, people want to kill you. Do you understand that? Brian Minor is very well connected and—"

"I gotta go," I said as I got up and headed for the door.

"Mr. Keyes, you are going into protective custody."

"Uh-huh," I scoffed at him, stopping at the door only as long as it took to open it and go through. At the end of the hall, Brian was being walked to wherever he was being taken by two uniformed police officers.

"Jory!" he yelled at me. "You're a dead man! Do you understand me? Dead!"

I smirked at him and flipped him off. He yanked free and came charging down the hall toward me. I had no idea what he thought he was going to do to me, handcuffed like he was, but he came anyway. He'd always been so big and brutish, one of those bull in a china shop kind of guys. A lot of big men were still fluid when they moved, like their size was perfect for them, but Brian had always seemed unaware of how strong he was or the confines of his own shoulders and legs. Plodding like an animal was what had forever come to mind. So when he got to me I ducked and crouched and swept my leg underneath him. He went down with a hard face-plant into the tile floor at my feet. I stood there a second and then very theatrically stepped over him.

"You sonofabitch!" he shrieked at me.

"Shut the hell up," I said irritably.

"Jory!" he screamed at me as I jumped over his thrashing legs before he was buried under five policemen. "I'm gonna fuckin' kill you... you fuckin' faggot! You hear me! Jory! You goddamn cocksucker!"

"Oh, go to hell, Brian," I groaned, turning to walk away from him. "And that whole faggot crap is so old. Who even uses that word anymore?"

"Jory!" he screamed after me.

"People with pickup trucks and gun racks, that's who," I chuckled, my own laughter sounding a little unhinged. I was ready to pass out.

"Jory!" His voice had lost some of its power but he was still shrieking.

I headed toward the stairs.

"Mr. Keyes!"

I pivoted around and Detective Kage was there with his nice captain that I'd met earlier and another of the square-cut jaw/square-cut hair guys who had been on the street with him. He did the two-fingered poke into my collarbone like he was trying to drill through my skin.

"Where the hell do you think—"

"Sam," the captain cautioned him, putting up his hand.

"Let's not—"

"He's an idiot," he gestured at me, "and he'll be dead this time tomorrow."

"And who would do that? Brian?" I smirked at him.

"Gimme a break."

He gestured at me again but said nothing.

"Mr. Keyes," the other detective began, his voice gentle, soothing. "Even though you think of Mr. Minor as simply the sonofabitch husband of one of your girlfriends, you must believe us when we tell you the man is not that benign. He's a drug dealer, a murderer, and someone you don't want to cross. There are a lot of people that don't want him in the position of choosing between jail time or talking about them.

You alone have the power to put him behind bars. Without you, he walks. Do you understand that?"

"I get it," I told him. "I do. I will testify. I will do whatever you need so he never sees Anna again as long as he lives. I promise, but seriously—I have a life. I mean, I get from being here for the last five hours that you guys don't think being someone's assistant is important. But I promise you that, to my boss, I actually matter. I've got so much shit to do, you have no idea." I let out a quick breath, finally shaking my head. "Call me and tell me what day I need to appear in court." I said, heading down the stairs to the exit.

"Mr. Keyes."

I sighed and turned around, looking up at the captain.

"They'll come after people you love."

I shrugged. "Good luck finding any." I said, before I turned back away from him.

Outside the air was cold. I had forgotten I was still in my dancing clothes, which consisted that night of a black spandex T-shirt, tight, brown, distressed boot-cut jeans and motorcycle boots. So because it was November, I was freezing. It smelled like it was going to rain and the breeze was icy. My teeth started to chatter as I looked for a cab.

A car slowed down beside me and I heard the sound of the automatic window going down. When I turned, a guy was smiling at me from the driver's side.

I waited for the come-on line.

"Hey, man, you need a lift?"

The whole ick factor of some middle-aged man in a van trying to pick me up in the same ride that he took his kids to school in made my skin crawl.

"I'm talking to you, pretty boy."

"No thanks," I said quickly, hoping he'd just drive away. "I don't need a ride."

"C'mon," he persisted, "how much?"

"I'm not hustling, man, I'm just walkin'," I said, moving faster.

"Sure you are," he leered at me. "Get in."

And I thought, it's the club clothes outside of the club, downtown, walking the streets alone at two in the morning. I couldn't fault his logic. I had rent boy written all over me.

"I...."

The horn scared us both. I jumped, and the guy was so startled that he gunned the motor and drove away. It would have been funny if my heart weren't pounding so hard. I shivered in spite of myself and looked up when someone shouted my name.

I saw the enormous SUV then, named after something nautical, black and shiny, and through the lowered window was Detective Kage. He was motioning me over. I shoved my hands down in my pockets as I walked over to see what he wanted.

"Get in," he snapped at me as soon as I peered in the window.

"I—"

"Mr. Keyes," he said sharply, and the exasperation was not lost on me.

"You're this close to being put in the vehicle whether you like it or not."

The way he said the word vehicle, so clinical, so like the cop that he was. Step away from the vehicle, put your hands on top of the vehicle, get in the vehicle.... it was funny. "Oh yeah?" I baited him because I figured I could move before he got a hold of me. "You think so?"

"Yeah," he warned me, his gaze level and dark. "I think so."

And it wasn't so much the ominous tone or the way he was looking at me as the muscle that flexed in his jaw. I realized I was closer to jeopardy than I realized. He was bigger than me, so the chances that he could hurt me were pretty good.

I opened the door and climbed up into the seat, swinging the heavy door shut hard.

He grunted at me. "Put on your goddamn seat belt."

"Do you know where I live?" I asked him.

"Yes," he almost growled. He had one of those voices that was low and husky, the kind that under other circumstances I would have found sexy as hell.

"I don't live in the city." I wanted to make sure he knew where he was going. "I live just on the other side of Austin Avenue in Oak Park."

He didn't respond so I gave up. There was some cowboy crap playing on the radio but it was low so I didn't complain.

"Did you hear me?" I asked him, checking.

"I know where you live," he said fast, clearly exasperated.

"It was one of the many questions you answered for me, as you may recall."

I rolled my eyes as my phone rang. "Hello?" I answered.

"Where the hell did you go?" Taylor Grant asked me irritably.

"To get a friend out of a jam," I smiled, slouching down in the seat.

"Were you gonna come back or call?"

I chuckled. "I thought that wasn't our deal. Either one of us could split at any time. It's your rule," I reminded him cheerfully.

Long silence.

"Right?"

"Yeah, right," he said, the annoyance clear in his voice.

"So where are you?"

"On my way home."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Tell me where that is."

"Nah. I'll call you," I told him.

"Jory," he said softly. "Please lemme see—"

"Later," I yawned and hung up. I wasn't in the mood for company. I just wanted to go home, shower off the night, and pass out in my bed.

"Friend of yours?"

"Not really," I told him, "just a guy."

"You got a lot of guys?"

I turned slowly to look at him.

"What?" he asked gruffly.

"What kind of question is that?"

"Fair, I would say."

I went back to staring out the window.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two." I clipped my answer, trying not to snap.

"Twenty-two," he repeated.

"Yeah."

"How can you afford to live alone?"

It was a weird question. "I told you already, I have a good job."

"And what else?"

I turned again to look at him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I think you know."

"I don't think I do, Detective. You need to spell it out for me."

"Fine. Does some guy help you out with your rent in exchange for fucking you?"

That was definitely clear. "No," I barely got out through my clenched jaw.

"No?"

"How do you know I'm even gay, Detective?"

He glanced at me, scoffing. "Dressed like that?"

"You know what, just lemme out."

"Knock it off. Don't be so dramatic." He was annoyed and his voice was dripping with it. "All you guys are so goddamn dramatic."

All you guys? "You mean gay guys?"

"Just drop it, all right? I'm tired and I don't feel like getting into a pissing contest with you. I'm driving you 'cause if I don't, you're gonna freeze to death. You don't even have a jacket."

"I'll take my chances."

"Just sit there and shut up."

And I granted his request and didn't say another word to him for the rest of the ride. When he dumped me in front of the old Victorian house that had been converted into four apartments, I got out. I slammed the door and ran across the lawn without a backward glance. I didn't check to see if he waited.

When I got inside I immediately fell down on my bed, fully clothed, with my shoes still on. I was exhausted. Having people shooting at you as you ran for your life was really very draining.

Chapter Two

By the time I got to work it was almost ten on Wednesday morning and I felt like turning around and going back home.

Riding into the city on the subway was usually almost fun. I liked seeing all the same faces every morning and talking to people I barely knew. The problem was we had an icy rain that morning that made everyone soggy and cranky and impatient with the routine inconvenience of being packed together like sardines. Once I got downtown I had to walk two blocks over to Cullen's and pick up my boss's car. He had called me at six in the morning to tell me that the mechanic forgot to drop it off at his house, so I had to make it happen.

I had to bring the car to the office. For the billionth time I remembered why I didn't own a vehicle. Driving in the city was hell. Between dodging traffic, having people blow their horns at me and suicidal pedestrians, I was ready to scream.

I had to be careful not to hit any parked cars on the tight streets, remember which way all the streets went, and try not to drive into a pothole that I could lose a wheel in. I thanked God that Dane's BMW was an automatic; I would have been dead otherwise. People almost always touch your back bumper at a stop, and when you're driving a stick shift it's so hard not to roll backwards just a teeny bit and nail somebody.

When a horn blast startled me, I made the light just in time.

It felt like it took a year to go ten blocks.

I stood in the lobby and shook like a dog while I took off my topcoat and stamped my feet. Piper Dowling, our front desk receptionist, was watching me, giggling the whole time.

"What?" I asked, looking over at her. She was a vision, like she was every morning, all big honey-blond curls, soft blue eyes, and perfect, flawless makeup that accentuated her beauty.

"You look really good all wet, angel."

I shot her a look, which sent her into peals of snorting laughter. When she recovered, she let me know that the coffee was still hot in the break room.

"Morning," Sonja Lawson called out to me from her desk as I walked by.

"Hey," I greeted her, smiling. "How are you this morning?"

She shrugged and I stopped before I hung up my coat on the vintage hat rack.

"What?" I found myself asking before I could stop myself. I didn't really care what was wrong; I found her altogether boring. She didn't date, didn't buy designer clothes or shoes, and didn't watch any of the same shows I did. We had absolutely zilch in common.

"Well, we're coming up on three months, J, and I still don't know if I'm staying here permanently or not."

I had no idea either.

"I mean the only reason I'm even here is because his office is ten times busier than any of the other partners.

Everybody wants him to do their homes, not Mr. Cogan or Mr. Brown."

"Sherman Cogan is a landscape architect, Sonja," I sighed, having explained that to her like a million times. "And Miles Brown's an interior designer. They don't all do the same thing."

"No, I know, but Dane's office is the busiest because he's the best."

As usual she didn't get why but I just let it go.

"Jory, I want to stay here."

"Yeah I know." She'd only told me that every single day since she started. From the day Dane had come into the office and she had looked up from her desk into his cool gray eyes, from that moment she had wanted to stay.

She sighed heavily. "I love everybody here."

I knew exactly who it was that she loved and wanted to be loved by in return.

"Jory, please."

"The decision has nothing to do with me." I said, shaking as much water off my coat as I could before walking over to my desk, squishing the whole way.

"What'd you do, swim to work?" She chuckled, momentarily distracted from her campaign to stay in Dane's office.

I grunted. "Yeah, it felt like that."

"You know what I'd really like?"

"I have no idea," I said, looking over at her.

"Your job." She smiled big.

"And what would I do?"

"My job."

"Yeah, right. Can you even imagine me being cute and perky all day long?"

She laughed at me as I cocked an eyebrow for her benefit.

I gave her a lot of credit for the smile she kept plastered on her face for eight hours a day. No way was I capable of such forced charm. My job had

more wiggle room to be bitchy.

I got to contact clients, sit in on initial meetings, go with my boss to clients' homes, and make sure that no one without an appointment ever got to see Dane Harcourt in the flesh. I also made a lot of trips to the dry cleaners and ordered flowers for whomever he was dating at the time.

Picking out birthday and Christmas presents also seemed to be in my job description. I didn't particularly mind that, though—it was fun. Besides, I liked it when people complimented Dane on his taste and he had no idea what the hell they were talking about, because he forgot to ask me what I bought. Since I carried a Platinum American Express card with my name on it, and I was the one that reconciled his statement, nine times out of ten he had no idea what he had spent or on whom. It was nice to be trusted implicitly, and I found that I was somewhat addicted to it. When Sonja's intercom buzzed suddenly and an annoyed voice asked her if I had arrived yet, I was amazed at how quickly all my good feelings fled.

"Yes, I have," I answered loudly, letting out a deep breath and raking my fingers through my damp curls before flopping down into my chair

"Come in here now," Dane snapped brusquely, and the intercom went dead.

I groaned loudly.

"Shhh," Sonja warned me.

"Why?"

"He'll hear you."

"And if he does?"

"I just think you should be sweet to him."

I was instantly suspicious. "Why?"

"Because he might have had a long morning."

"Why?" I asked again, and I could feel my brows drawing together.

"Well," she said hesitantly, "Therese Warner called like an hour ago and told me she was coming by."

"That wouldn't do it," I said, standing, fussing with my sweater, my dress pants, making sure I looked good before I walked into his office, checking my shoes. "Unless you let her talk to him."

Silence, so I looked up at her. She looked guilty as hell.

"Oh shit," I groaned. "Are you kidding me?"

"What's the big deal?"

"Sonja," I whined. "C'mon."

"I forgot that you told me she wasn't to be put through."

She took a deep shaky breath. "So when she told me she was coming by, I asked her if she wanted to speak to Mr.

Harcourt."

"Perfect," I grumbled. Wednesday was getting better and better. "Anything else you wanna tell me before I go in?"

"I put Mr. Reid through too."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and counted to ten. My friend, Evan, always said that it was about visualization. You to imagine your happy place and you would be there instead of in that moment. Unfortunately it didn't seem to be working. It really wasn't such a big deal that he was irritated; he was irritated with me ninety percent of the time. The problem was sitting through the lecture that always followed.

The man lived to reiterate my mistakes.

"I'm dead. I'm so dead."

"Why? It's my fault, not yours."

"But I'm responsible for everything that happens to him at work."

"She giggled. "C'mon, J. You're taking yourself a little seriously right now."

I shook my head. "No, I mean stuff that has to do with the office, that's my baby. I'm supposed to make sure that things run smooth here."

"I don't think it's really that big a deal."

"If you knew him better you'd know what this is really about."

"What's it about?"

"Following directions," I told her just as the door to Dane's office opened and he filled the doorway. I couldn't stifle my groan in time.

"Has the meaning of the word *now* escaped you completely?"

"No sir." I said getting up and following him back into his office. I was careful to close the door quietly behind me.

"I want you to make arrangements with the temp agency to have Miss Lawson transferred out off this office as soon as possible. I think our contact over there is Darcy somebody.

Call her."

"Pardon?" That I hadn't expected.

"I want her out of my office. Preferably today." He clipped his words. It was so early for that.

"But she does such a good—"

"I don't care where she goes," he said crossly, cutting me off. "I just want her out of here. She can't follow simple directions."

"Why? It was a simple mistake about letting Miss Warner and Mr. Reid talk to you this morning," I defended her, sitting down in the chair in front of his desk. "It won't happen again."

I'll explain that—"

"Do you see that?" he said sharply, cutting me off again.

He motioned to the flowers on his desk that I hadn't noticed.

They were long-stemmed red roses arranged with baby's breath and they were absolutely beautiful. The vase they were in was lovely too, very expensive.

"Yeah."

"Yes," he corrected me. He hated *yeah*.

"Yes," I said again.

"And?"

"And what?" I asked, my tone a little sharper than I meant to.

He cocked an eyebrow at me like he was waiting for me to say something. I looked at him and waited. He laced his fingers slowly and continued to stare at me. I looked into his cool gray eyes and noticed for the billionth time how beautiful they were with the flecks of silver in them and how much darker they got when he was annoyed. And then it hit me.

He could tell I'd had a revelation, and smiled smugly.

"Did Sonja leave you flowers again?"

"Yes." He smiled but it never touched his eyes. They didn't sparkle like they did when he was actually happy. When he was really pleased there was a warm glow that was irresistible.

"She's got a huge crush on you, you know." I smiled because it was sweet.

"Yes, I know."

"But that's not—"

"I've told you and I've told her that I do not appreciate her advances toward me no matter how innocent they may be. I gave specific directions that the behavior needed to stop." He spoke very slowly, very crisply, spacing each of his words so I'd be sure to hear them. "It is not appropriate office decorum and will no longer be tolerated. Between the flowers and the little notes and the chocolates on Valentine's Day, I'm done."

"What if I make her promise?"

"No," he snapped.

"But, Boss, it's just not—"

"Call Darcy and tell her that I want her moved today and a new receptionist in here tomorrow. I want it done before lunch."

"Seriously?"

"Yes," he assured me.

"What if Darcy's got no one else to send us? You're saying you'd rather answer your own phone than have her here?"

"You answer my phone, not her."

This was an excellent point.

"I want her out," he repeated.

"But what if they've got nowhere to send her? Maybe then she can't afford rent or—"

"I don't care."

"Wow. That's a little harsh, don't you think?"

"I don't," he said irritably, and I could see that his patience was at an end. I knew instantly that there had to be something else bothering him. He hated to be irritated, hated repeating himself, but minor annoyances never got to him. He was a rock. "She goes today. I've had it. I will not be bothered every day for no reason."

"But—"

"She's gone. I gave her every chance."

"Why should she be punished because she finds you irresistible?" I thought maybe I could appeal to his vanity. "I would think it would nice to walk into the office first thing every morning and know that someone thought you were the absolute epitome of everything that was right with the world."

I know I'd like it. It would be very flattering."

"Unlike others...." Meaning me, of course. And I got it even before he let it hang in the air between us. "I don't need my ego perpetually stroked. She needs to go, and go now. And furthermore, I don't think you would find it flattering, I think you'd find it to be more like harassment. At least I would hope you would have that much integrity." After a beat he asked, "Do you?"

I looked down and counted to ten again so I wouldn't tell him where to go. He could be so arrogant that sometimes just thinking about telling him off made it almost impossible not to. When I looked back up he was staring at me again with the dark scowl he held the patent for. After a minute I squinted at him, making his head small, thinking how easy it would be to crush. How satisfying if his eyes bugged out when it exploded.

"You're doing that thing with your eyes."

"What thing?"

"That thing you do where you make my head small and then think how easy it would be to crush it."

I grunted. He knew me too well.

"Listen, just tell Miss Lawson that I'm sure she'll be happier elsewhere. Also," he added, pulling an envelope out of the top drawer of his desk, "give this to Miss Warner when she comes by. I don't have time to speak to her."

I took it and got up to leave.

"Don't you want to know what it is?" he asked slowly.

"You're usually so inquisitive."

He meant nosy.

"Jory?"

"You mean nosy." I said flatly.

"Is that what I said?" He was back to clipping his words.

"No."

"So do you plan to be surly all day then?"

"No."

"I see," he nodded, taking a breath and getting up to go to the window of his office. "Tell Miss Warner that in lieu of my attendance at the Bachelor Auction next week, I've given her a check for ten thousand dollars. That's

far more than she would have gotten had I participated, so she should be well pleased."

It was an AIDS benefit, and in my opinion he was shortchanging himself. I could just see Miss Therese Warner and Miss Lacey Collins waging the battle of the pocketbooks over who would have my boss as a dinner companion that night. I was sure it would go well into the thousands, much more than ten. Therese would see this as her opportunity to talk to him and convince him he was wrong about breaking it off with her. Lacey would be in defense mode, trying to keep all other women away from her man. She was the flavor of the month, and she did have Dane Harcourt after all, for the moment.

"What are you thinking?"

I looked over to where he was and noticed he was staring at me again.

"Nothing."

"Tell me," he ordered, walking back to his desk and passing me the roses.

"You think it's not enough? I'm not doing all that I can? I should do more for AIDS research?"

"Everyone should, but that's not it."

"Well, then?" He waited, and his gray eyes were back to mine.

"I just think that you'd have raised more money if you'd gone."

"Why?"

I smiled in spite of myself. He sounded like he was fishing for a compliment. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Not to me."

"Okay, I see it starting off with everybody bidding and then finally it'll come down to Miss Warner and Miss Lawson fighting it out for the

privilege of your company."

"You do," he said tiredly.

"I do," I told him. Hell, he'd asked. "And maybe Miss Palmer and Miss Smythe will want to bid too. It'll be a feeding frenzy."

"I see."

"Don't you think so?"

"Well, we'll never know, will we?"

"Guess not." I shrugged, putting his car keys that I still had in my hand down on his desk.

"Also, should Mr. Reid come by, he is to be removed at once. I've already made my feelings perfectly clear to him on the subject of any unsolicited visitations to this office. So, should he come by, he knows what reception to expect. You should alert building security at once. Am I making myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good."

"He called me last night," I threw out, remembering having seen the familiar number on my cell phone after Detective Kage dropped me off. I hadn't even heard it ring while I was taking my hour-long shower. I had to wash away all traces of the night with the hottest water possible. It had felt amazing.

"Who?"

"Mr. Reid." I said, reaching the door.

"Wait," he ordered before I could open it. "When did he call? After work?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Yes," I repeated, rolling my eyes.

"He called your cell?"

"Yes but I didn't actually talk to him. I was supposed to call him, he left a number."

"And were you going to call?"

"Yes," I almost snapped at him. "I have to tell him not to call me again because if you're not talking to him then I'm certainly not going to. It's none of my business whatever he wants to talk about."

"You're dying to know what that's all about, aren't you?"

He could be so conceited. Here I had this huge event transpire in my life and I wasn't going to tell him, but he thought I was just burning up with a need to know why Mr.

Caleb Reid had basically stalked him for the last three weeks.

"Jory."

I looked back at him. "You're right; I used to want to know."

"But you don't anymore."

"Now it doesn't matter so much." And even as I realized how irrational I was being, I was still annoyed. Logically, being mad at him for not caring about something I'd never told him was ridiculous. Unfortunately, I got a D in logic in college. I only passed because I had tried so hard and my professor knew it. I still remember her shaking her head, asking me how in the world I couldn't grasp the material after spending time with both her and the grad student that was assisting her in class. Half the problem had been

that her so-called teaching assistant had been much more interested in sleeping with me than in helping me learn anything. But I really was so seriously right-brained that it was a wonder I could walk a straight line. Time had done nothing to help this.

"Jory."

"Hmmm?"

"You're a million miles away. What's going on with you?"

This was my opening to come clean. "Nothing."

"Why don't you care about Mr. Reid anymore?"

I shrugged.

He was searching my eyes. "Your curiosity borders on compulsive and you are incessant with your questioning.

What's changed?"

"It's not my business."

"Which I've pointed out a million times and has never once stopped you."

"Well, it will from now on."

He gave me the slightest smile. "So, you're growing up is what you're telling me."

I let my irritation out in the sharp exhale of breath and turned for the door.

He walked over to stand in front of me. "Has he called you before?"

"No."

"And how did he get your number?"

"Someone gave it to him."

"Who?"

"I have no idea." I yawned involuntarily.

"Miss Lawson?"

"I dunno."

"You know," he said, closing the door as I opened it. "And it matters to me and that's why we're going to rid ourselves of this little problem."

"You're blowing this way out of proportion."

"Am I? Is my number being given out as well?"

"Nobody but me has that number here at work." I assured him. "And I don't want to die young—younger, so don't worry."

"You're safe."

"It would be nice for you to know that someone cares as much about your privacy as you seem to care about mine."

"I don't seem to care, boss," I said tightly, emphasizing the word *seem* just as he had. "I *do* care."

"Well, we'll see, won't we?"

He was using his snide tone. I closed my eyes for a second so I wouldn't scream. Instead, once I took a breath, I asked him if that was all. He didn't answer so I tilted my head back so I could see his face. "Is that all?" I repeated.

"It is," he said, walking back to his desk.

I left his office and walked out to the main lobby with the roses.

"For me, doll?" Piper asked.

I grunted at her and went back.

Later that morning I was looking for my green highlighter as Therese Warner turned the corner and entered the outer office. As she headed toward Dane's door, she thanked Sonja for putting her through to him earlier in the morning.

"Miss Warner," I called before she turned the knob.

She looked at me over her shoulder as I came around my desk. "I have business to discuss with Mr. Harcourt." Her tone was sharp.

"No, I'm afraid you don't." I handed her the envelope. "Mr. Harcourt regrets that he will be unable to attend the benefit next week, but has provided you with a check for ten thousand dollars to make up for his absence at the charity event."

"Did you practice that all morning?" she said tightly.

Funny, but when she was dating my boss, she thought it was marvelous the way I brushed off his old flames, and we got along great. I liked her because she was so talkative.

Most of the others didn't bother to speak to me at all, except to order me to do something. *Oh Jory, be a dear and do this that and that and the other for me. Dane will be delighted that you're doing me this small favor.* Therese had been different. She would sit in the chairs outside his office and visit with me, asking if I was dating any cute boys, telling me that she wished her eyelashes were as long as mine, her eyes as big and dark.

"I swear, Jory," she would lean on the desk, "your eyes look just like melting chocolate, that beautiful deep brown with those flecks of gold. I just hate you. And all that thick, blond hair you've got, my goodness, it's a wonder you don't have a stalker. You look more like a model than an assistant."

And I'd laughed because she was funny but now our days of getting along were over.

"No, I told her. "I'm just telling you what he said."

She took the envelope. "Why isn't he going?"

"He didn't say."

"I'm sure you know, he tells you everything."

Such a lie. "He doesn't."

"He told me he does."

It was too bad that Therese didn't know when she was being baited. He'd probably said he told me everything to see what her reaction would be. I knew how he operated. It was too bad she didn't. "He didn't mean it."

"Dane means everything he says."

"You think?"

"I have to speak to him," she said, leaving my desk and walking back to his door. "It's very important."

"Is it?"

"I have to speak to him," she mumbled again as I walked up beside her.

"He's not taking my calls. Here, at the club..."

he doesn't answer his cell...."

"Oh," I needed to assure her, "that has nothing to do with you. He's got other stuff going on."

"So I'm just what, another irritation for him?" she snipped at me cattily.

"That's not what I meant," I told her seriously. There's nothing more irritating to me than having people misconstrue my words or my motivation. I hated people that assumed things.

"I need to see him, Jory," she said softly, trying to appeal to me like we were pals.

"Take the check and leave, Miss Warner," I told her, moving her hand gently off the doorknob. "He doesn't want to see you. Don't force a scene that you'll both regret."

"I wanted to marry him."

"I have no doubt that you did."

"One day everything was perfect and the next day he said he thought it would be better if we started seeing other people."

I nodded. I knew all this already. He gave all of them the same speech, the "you're-just-too-good-for-me speech" when he needed air and had to get away. The key to the man, the same as most, was to give him tons of space and act like he didn't matter at all. Be there when he wanted you and make yourself scarce when he didn't. But not one of them had ever been able to pull it off. They started out all outrageous and aloof and then fell hard and wanted to smother him and keep him locked up. He got under their skin so fast; the desire to cage him came with panicky obsession almost overnight. And I saw him recoil and then retreat behind his crazy jam-packed schedule and me. He loved to use me as a shield, sometimes even in person. He would show up with me in tow just to drive a point home. Dinner dates became dinner meetings, weekend retreats became working weekends, whenever he was looking for distance... he brought me along as a buffer.

Whenever he wanted the person he was with to stay back.

"I am so in love with him I can't see straight."

I was brought back sharply to the present. "I'm sorry, Miss Warner. Whaddya want me to say?"

She let out a shaky breath.

What was I supposed to do? It had to be agony for her. All she had to do was open the paper to the society page to see a picture of another woman on her ex-lover's arm. It had to be maddening, especially since he'd belonged to her such a short time ago.

"How can he just turn it off and forget about me so quickly?"

She was asking the question to the air, addressing no one in particular. I doubt she remembered I was even there. I just stood beside her looking stupid because I didn't know what else to do. If we were friends I could console her; sit up nights with her, make her go out on blind dates just so she'd be out and not stuck in the house, and stay up late and let her cry on my shoulder for hours. If she were my friend I'd entertain her constantly for as long as it took to get Dane Harcourt out of her system. The problem was Therese Warner was not my friend, so I felt awkward and embarrassed and desperate to leave the room.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bradley," Sonja said from behind us.

We both turned and I offered a hand to the lady who joined us at the door to Dane's office.

Mrs. Miriam Bradley took my hand and squeezed it tightly.

She seemed genuinely pleased to see me and I felt like I knew her, as many times as we'd spoken on the phone.

"How are you, Jory?"

"Fine, thank you. Are you ready for your initial meeting with Mr. Harcourt?"

"I've been waiting for this for months. I'm more than ready."

"Terrific," I said cheerfully. I stepped aside so I could open the door for her and make sure Therese didn't get in at the same time. Not that she was trying to.

Mrs. Bradley didn't enter the room, but stood and looked at Therese. "Have we met? You seem very familiar to me."

Therese smiled automatically. "I think we have a membership at the same club in Highland Park. I seem to recall seeing you there. My father is Simon Warner."

"Yes, that's it," she smiled, offering Therese her hand. She was so beautiful and graceful. I knew women that didn't look that good at thirty let alone at sixty. I didn't understand guys that were in their fifties and sixties that went for trophy wives, when there were stunning women out there who were their own age. But I didn't get gay men that went for guys half their age either. I guess a midlife crisis was the same no matter who you wanted in bed with you. "You're Therese Warner. Well, my dear, I'm so glad to finally get to meet you in person."

Therese thanked her tightly, trying hard not to cry.

"Come in, Mrs. Bradley," Dane called from inside his office.

I closed the door behind her after she told Therese that she hoped they would be able to play a set of tennis together very soon. I turned back to Therese and begged her to leave.

"I want him to see me."

"He doesn't want to see you."

"Why? What did I do wrong?"

"I'm sure you haven't done anything wrong."

"Has he said something?" she brightened instantly. God, she was hoping so hard, I was sorry I'd said anything at all.

"No," I mumbled. "He hasn't said a word. But he's going to come out of his office in a minute, and I think you should leave before that and try and talk to him another time."

"How am I supposed to do that? I can't call him here and I can't call him at home. He doesn't answer his cell and he won't speak to me in public.... I've tried to—to talk to him and he just won't—won't do...." She trailed off, beginning to tear up.

I shook my head. "There's something really bothering him, Miss Warner. I would just give him some time, if I were you, to sort through—"

"So you think everything will be all right then?"

"I don't know that I'm in any position to—"

"But you know him so well, Jory," she said, cutting me off.

"Please tell me what you think."

She wanted some kind of encouragement so badly. I sighed heavily. "Miss Warner, I don't know what—"

The office door suddenly opened and Dane stepped out. He looked at Therese, brows furrowed, and she started to cry. He took a deep breath and rubbed his forehead hard. I knew that particular movement well. I got it a lot. Like when he would talk to me and I would ask him questions instead of answering. I couldn't help it; I liked to delve into his life. Not that he ever let me but it never stopped me from trying.

He sighed deeply and put a hand on Therese's shoulder. "I want to apologize for what happened Saturday, I was not myself. I've had a lot of things on my mind lately, and I'm sorry it came to a head while I was speaking to you. I deeply regret having raised my voice to you. Please accept my apology."

"Of course," she breathed. I saw her melt just looking at him. She leaned toward him even as he took a step away.

"I should be more careful." He turned to me then and was going to say something, but stopped himself. He just looked at me and I stared back for a minute before I got uncomfortable.

"What?" I asked, feeling weird all of a sudden.

"What have you done about Miss Lawson?"

"I haven't had a chance to—"

"Do so now," he grumbled, turning back to Therese and giving her a little pat on the arm before dropping his hand from her shoulder. "I am sorry."

She just stared at him with this pained expression on her face.

His eyes fell to the floor and then were back to me like he was searching for something to say but was unable to find the words.

"What?" I repeated, keenly aware that Therese was staring at me instead of him.

"I'm hungry."

I smiled suddenly. I couldn't help it. "What do you want?"

"What do *you* want?"

I shook my head. "I'll just get you something."

"Something good," he muttered.

"Like I don't know what to get," I baited him, trying to get a response.

He raked his fingers through his thick hair, gave me a crooked grin, and then retreated back into his office and shut the door behind him.

"He's flippin' out," I said firmly, realizing I might be right.

If Dane freaked out, then my sanity was sure to go. He was the steadiest person I knew.

"What's the matter with him?" Therese asked me, as she followed me back to my desk.

"He's flippin' out," I repeated before I sighed heavily.

"Maybe you can give him a call later, huh?"

She nodded and left without another word.

"What did he mean when he asked you about me?" Sonja asked, looking at me pitifully.

I let out a deep breath before I reminded her about the roses I had taken to the lobby.

"Ohmygod," she said, her eyes filling up. "Is he really mad about that?"

"Not mad exactly," I said softly. "It's just that I think we've answered the question of whether or not you're going to be here permanently or not."

"We have?"

"Oh yeah," I drew it out.

"But I don't want to—"

"I'm sorry, Sonja," I cut her off quickly. "There's nothing that you or I can do about it now. He's made up his mind and when he does that, we both know that's it."

"It's just because of the flowers?"

"And all the other stuff," I sighed. "You've got a crush on him."

"He knows that?" She was incredulous.

"Everyone knows that."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. You've made it very clear that you're interested in having more than a professional relationship with him."

"Who doesn't?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Well, me for one," I told her honestly.

"You're a guy, Jory, and Dane's not gay."

There was that.

"But I swear to God, you're the only one I know who doesn't want him. Both Celia and Jill are crazy about him too."

"Maybe so, but maybe that also makes it possible for me to be the only one who can work for him. You obviously can't." I knew that Celia Johnson and Jill Kincaid were both crazy about my boss, but they didn't work for him so he didn't know they wanted to jump his bones. Celia worked for Miles Brown and Jill worked for the third partner at the firm, Sherman Cogan.

"But," her voice dropped to a whisper. "I think he's starting to like me."

You irritate the hell out of him, I thought, sitting down on the edge of her desk. "He likes you fine, Sonja, we're just going to make sure you get out of here before he starts not to like you."

"You don't know what it's like to be around him every day and not be able to touch him."

Oh God, all these lovesick puppies in the office

The door to Dane's office opened, and he and Mrs. Bradley came out. He walked over to me as I stood up, sliding off Sonja's desk..

"I'll be out of the office until twelve, so get lunch for us and be back so we can go over the schedule for the Mamon house. I expect to find only you here," he said, making a point of looking right at me when he said it. "We've got a lot to do."

"Yessir."

"Don't be late."

"No."

"And don't forget my lunch."

I felt the frown, my eyebrows lowering fast.

"Fine," he grumbled.

"Should I get you a drink too?" I asked sarcastically. I obviously needed everything to be spelled out for me in big, neon letters. Since I was such an idiot and all.

He gave me a smile then and turned and followed Mrs. Bradley out of the office. Mrs. Bradley *herself* was a case of puppy love; she had asked me over the phone, without even having laid eyes on the man—their conversations alone sparking more than professional interest—if Dane ever dated his clients. I told her that I didn't know. She confessed to me that she found him compelling and impossible to get out of her mind. Having heard so many other such confessions, I had merely smiled on my end and given her an appointment time.

"Oh Jory," Sonja sighed. "Can't you just tell him I'm sorry and it won't happen again?"

I shook my head and was going to try and say something comforting when my phone rang. I went around my desk and answered.

"So Thanksgiving's in two weeks. You know that, right?"

"Nick," I smiled into the receiver because I never forgot a voice. Sometimes it was a bad thing because it gave people I hardly knew the feeling that I cared more than I really did, which was the case here. "What're you talking about?"

"I'm just reminding you that you promised."

"I'm sorry, what did I promise?"

Heavy sigh from a guy I had been on two dates with. He was very nice, a resident at the county hospital. "You're spending four days with me. My parents have a cabin in Tahoe, I mean in Incline Village, but it's like the same thing.

We can ski every day. You're gonna love it."

I doubted that, since skiing was not really my thing.

"Huh."

"And I know you're not psyched about it, but I really want you to go and you can just sit around and relax and drink all weekend with me and my friends."

"I see." I chuckled.

"I already bought your ticket."

"I can pay you back."

He cleared his throat. "C'mon, Jory. I don't wanna be paid back. If you don't use the ticket, it's not like I can't use it or—"

"Oh good."

"Not oh good." He chuckled. "I want you to go with me. I have a reoccurring fantasy of being under a mound of blankets with you while snow is falling outside."

I smiled into the phone. "That's very romantic."

"Don't I know it!"

I laughed at him. "I'll think about it, all right?"

"Okay, that's fair. In the meantime, can I take you to dinner tomorrow night?"

"Actually I've got a—"

"Jory," he cut me off, and his voice dropped to a whisper.

He was obviously somewhere other people were and he didn't want them to hear. "Baby, you can't just sleep with me once and blow me off."

"No? Most guys like it that way."

"I'm not most guys. I want to see you, I want to spend time with you. I have this great breakfast nook in my townhouse that you'd look great at first thing in the morning."

Which was nice. The problem was there was no spark at all. Not even a drop of chemistry. I had sex with him because I felt like if I didn't I would be a cocktease. I had a personal rule: if you made it to my apartment, you were getting laid.

He'd been there on the second date, and even though I didn't really feel like it at that point, I had sex with him anyway. I knew I was in trouble when we were done and he wanted to spend the night. I lied to get him out of my bed because I didn't sleep with anyone. Screw, yes; cuddle up with, no. I'd never loved anyone enough or trusted anyone enough to let them spend the night.

"Listen," I said gently. "Why don't I call you later after I see if my boss is gonna need me tomorrow night or not."

"Oh, you gotta work. I'm sorry, I thought you were trying to blow me off."

I was, but it was nicer this way. "No."

"Okay. Great. Call me later."

"I will," I lied.

"Maybe I should run over there and write the number on your hand so you don't forget it."

"No-no-no." I chuckled into the receiver. "Don't do that."

I've gotta go get my boss some lunch. I'm not even gonna be here in like five minutes."

"Then I'll leave it on your voicemail."

"You're persistent, Nicky, I'll give you that."

"You have no idea."

I hung up the phone, then thought about it, and was about to call him back and just be honest when Sonja plopped down on my desk.

"Talk to Dane one more time please, J."

So funny that she called my boss by his first name. I could never do that. It wasn't respectful enough.

"Jory, sweetie, please."

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. Didn't she know that reasoning with Dane Harcourt when he had his mind made up was like reasoning with a hungry grizzly bear?

"If anyone can get him to come around it's you, Jory."

Why did everybody always say that? Why, when Sherman wanted something, did he come to me to break the ice for him first? Sherman Cogan and Miles Brown had been in this business with Dane Harcourt from day one, and yet they still walked around on eggshells with him. One of the men was himself a high-profile interior designer, with years of successful multi-million dollar projects to his credit, the other, one of the top landscape architects in the country. Yet they both worshipped my boss because he exclusively worked on residential homes. Apparently that was where the big bucks really were. I had thought that commercial buildings were where the money was, and I was right, but big-ticket contracts were harder to come by than society homes. And I had to admit that it was the name *Harcourt* that brought most people through our doors, having seen his work in *Architectural Digest* or *Sunset* or other magazines. The name recognition belonged to my boss.

When I first came to work for him almost five years ago, I had no clue who Dane Harcourt was. All I did know was that his firm had advertised for an assistant and I needed a job.

Being brand-new in town, I needed to get out of the YMCA and start paying rent. I had three days to figure everything out before I would be living on the street. I had put in applications practically everywhere and the panic was starting to settle in.

I had shown up, with at least a hundred others, to fill two positions at the design firm of Harcourt, Brown, and Cogan.

Debbie Towney was the office/accounting manager and she was done with it being just her and Jill Kincaid, the workload was just too heavy. Jill herself could not be expected to answer the phones, do all the typing, filing, Xeroxing, scheduling of hundreds and hundreds of business appointments and still remain sane. It had been decided that each partner would have his own personal assistant that would be responsible for only his work. I

figured since typing speed hadn't been a prerequisite for the job, I could apply without making a fool of myself. I was wrong.

They made us all take a typing test. I failed miserably. I was allowed to return the next day because I got a perfect score on the vocabulary and spelling portions of the test, as well as knowing my stuff in the graphic design area. Not that I was a pro or anything, but the entire Adobe suite and I were very close friends. The problem was the next morning I had found a puppy—a Siberian husky mix, the vet said later—

walking around on the street on my way over. I tried to get rid of it but the little bastard followed me for eight blocks. He was tenacious, and when he almost got run over darting across Michigan Avenue after me, I broke down and scooped him up. The whimpers of joy melted me right there. The dog and I bonded. I told him he was lucky he had a heavy coat because we'd be living outdoors in the very near future. He gave me the angled head-tip that dogs do when they're not sure what's going on with you.

Since I figured I didn't have a hope in hell of getting the assistant job anyway, I took my new puppy with me to the second interview. Needless to say, I was the only one who arrived with a barking dog in a cardboard pet carrier. Jill Kincaid asked me to leave just as Dane Harcourt walked out of his office. Everybody smiled, I grimaced, and he scowled.

I was invited into his office and I sat down in front of his enormous, antique wooden desk. His office was dark, with a polished hardwood floor that made one think an English scholar lived there instead of an architect. Bookcases took up almost all of the available space and several beautiful oil paintings hung on the walls. In one corner were several large plants, and in the other, next to the big bay window, were two huge wingback chairs and a small coffee table that was inlaid with tiles. The tiles were each hand-painted, I later learned, and each piece fit together to make a picture of a peacock. It had been his grandmother's table and it made him feel good to have it in his office, close to him. It made him feel like he still had a piece of her with him. After several minutes, he had stopped talking and looked at

me. Like he was surprised at himself for explaining. But everyone shared with me. It was a gift.

He started to ask me about my qualifications and my brand-new puppy started to howl. I answered as best as I could, and he seemed genuinely impressed that I was planning to pursue a degree in fine art, until he started grilling me about what I was going to do with it once I had it.

I told him I didn't know. I explained that I was going to major in it because I liked it and that was all. I was unsure of what I really wanted to do with my life. He replied that he wanted someone who was sure of their career choice, not some fly-by-night person who could be there one day and gone the next. I denied that would be the case when my puppy let out a bloodcurdling cry.

"What the hell's the matter with it?"

"*He*," I emphasized, "is just scared. He doesn't know where he is and I'm sure it's frightening."

"May I ask a stupid question?"

"Sure."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"You know perfectly well what," he smiled, and I knew I could like the man. "Why did you bring your dog to this interview?"

"Because I just found him this morning and I didn't have enough time to take him back to the Y, or else I would have been late to see you, and I can't really leave him in my room alone anyway, I mean... I'll have to sneak him in tonight as it is."

"You found him today?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Excuse me?"

"I hate the word *yeah*. Say yes instead."

"Okay," I said slowly, because who hated the word *yeah*?

"Yes."

"When?"

"On the way over here."

"You found him just now."

I shrugged. "At least I stopped to get a carrier for him. I didn't want him taking a dump in your office."

"Very thoughtful of you."

I sighed deeply. This was a disaster.

"You found a dog on your way to this interview," he said, like he was trying to get it to sink in.

"Maybe it's a good omen." I smiled wide.

He stared at me. "Big believer in signs, are you?"

"Yes sir, I am," I said, using the word he preferred that time.

"Why not just take him to the pound?"

I squinted at him. "How is that hopeful?"

His eyes were locked on mine before he cleared his throat.

"You know your dog is loud, good luck sneaking him in anywhere."

"He's just noisy because he's stuffed in a box."

"Is that right?"

"Sure."

"Let's test your theory."

"Pardon me?"

"Let's see him."

"Really?"

"Absolutely," Dane said, getting up and walking around his desk and sitting on the edge of it. "If you don't let him out, it sounds like he'll die or something."

I leaned over and opened the top of the cardboard carrier and Shiloh stopped howling and sat down. He looked up at both of us and started to wag his tail. I was about to pick him up, when Dane bent down and scooped him out of the carrier.

My little puppy immediately started licking his face and then shoved his wet nose into the man's eye.

"Sorry," I half-laughed, "he's just happy to see you."

"He's real cute."

"I know. I can already tell he's gonna be a real pain in the ass."

Dane put him down and Shiloh proceeded to run circles around the room.

"Tell me, Mr.—" he stopped, and looked up at me, "Keyes, is it?"

"It is," I answered, reaching unsuccessfully for my dog as he ran under my feet. "But you can call me Jory or J or whatever. I don't care."

"Tell me, Mr. Keyes, what do you think is more important, loyalty to me or loyalty to Harcourt, Brown, and Cogan? Are you a team player or more inclined to support the individual?"

I thought a minute, calculating what I thought he wanted to hear, but decided to just go with my gut. What could it possibly hurt? "If I work directly for you, Mr. Harcourt, then that's where my loyalty lies. I would be your personal assistant, no one else's."

He nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Keyes, we'll be in touch."

I thanked him and would have left then, but it took the both of us in a team effort to catch Shiloh and put him back in the carrier. Once we did, much whimpering and howling soon followed.

"He's such a faker," Dane smiled broadly. "He's going to be quite a handful."

I nodded, "I know, but imagine the fun."

"Imagine the fun," he echoed, his voice warm.

I looked up at him and smiled. "You've been really great about this."

He nodded. "What are you going to call him?"

"Shiloh."

"Civil War fan, are you?"

"No," I said flatly, "Neil Diamond."

"Oh." He was at a loss for words and I laughed. He was okay.

A day later, the last day I had before I was forced to leave, Jill Kincaid called and offered me the position as Miles Brown's personal assistant. I accepted immediately and was able to say yes to the guy I had met out at a club a week before. He and four others were moving into a studio apartment and he had asked me if I wanted to live with them. I had just enough for the first month of rent if I didn't have to spend another penny. After I got the call, I forked it all over to the landlord of my new place, the tiny apartment downtown beside the train tracks, looking like heaven after having nowhere to call home. That night I made my new roommates a deal that if they would feed the two of us, my dog and me, for the next two weeks until I got my first paycheck, I'd take care of the groceries and cooking for a month. I was shocked when they all agreed. Turned out that I was unanimously liked, they thought my dog was cool, and the idea of having a home-cooked meal every night for a month appealed to everyone.

When Shiloh and I left the YMCA, I felt like I was finally going to be all right. And I was so thankful to the firm of Harcourt, Brown, and Cogan.

When I reported for work, Jill informed me that she had been confused and that I would be Mr. Harcourt's assistant instead of Miles Brown's. *She* was supposed to have been his assistant, but apparently he had other plans. She wanted to know what exactly I had done for him during my interview. I wanted to deck her. Dane saved me the trouble though when he walked out and told everyone that I had been the most honest person he'd interviewed. And the dog helped. Jill rolled her eyes and Miles's new assistant, Celia Johnson, was baffled. Dog? Had he said dog?

I soon found out, from the steady stream of applicants checking in to see if the position had been filled, the real reason he had chosen me to be his assistant. I was by far the only one not completely infatuated with him. Women swooned when he walked by. Jill and Celia both wanted my job very badly, and we couldn't keep a receptionist out front.

The rotation in the office was about one every two months.

That was about how long it took them to really piss him off.

The girls all fell hard for his casual charm and that smile that lit up his eyes. I saw them lean over his desk and talk to him and I watched their hands hover over his shoulder when he wasn't looking, wanting to touch him but not daring to. They all wanted to be close to him—everybody except me. I could have cared less, so of course I was the only one he let get near him. He was himself with me because, gay or not, I was a guy and he didn't have to be careful with physical contact or with what came out of his mouth. He was painfully, brutally honest, blunt to the point where I was wincing for a while every time he spoke. But over the passing months I found that I just plain liked him, and my feelings sprang from a different source than infatuation or longing. I understood, beneath all the polish and style, that the man's heart was actually the most amazing thing about him. He hid his warmth and kindness well but I knew him better than anyone.

I knew the man had gotten choked up when he drove me home from the vet after I put Shiloh to sleep. My sweet dog had succumbed to cancer at a year and a half, and I could no longer bear to watch him suffer. I had gotten the hard squeeze on the shoulder when I got out of the car. It was all he would let me see, but it was so much more than anyone else got.

"Jory."

My mind had been drifting, and when I looked up I saw how pained Sonja Lawson looked.

"Please, Jory, talk to him," she pleaded. "I swear I'm not leaving until he gets back. I want to talk to him. I think I can make this right with him."

"If you think so," I conceded, knowing full well that the whole thing was hopeless. "Stay if you want, but I'm telling you what I think you should do."

"What's that?"

"Run away," I teased her.

"That's not very mature."

"I'm just letting you know what I think. He wanted you gone, and you're doing just the opposite. Don't expect him to be happy when he gets back from lunch."

She turned away and went back to her desk. I felt really sorry for her, but there was nothing I could do. I had already asked him to reconsider his decision, without success. I knew that when she irritated him by staying until he got back, I'd be the one in trouble. The phone saved me from thinking about it.

"You want the number to the doctor's lounge now?" he asked without a greeting.

"Nick, you're seriously demented," I assured him before I took down the number he gave me. After he hung up, I left for Mediterranean food, because that usually put my boss in a pretty good mood.

I barely heard Sonja when I walked back into the office.

She was crying and whining and saying how much she didn't want to go. I tuned her out after a few minutes while I answered e-mails, checked his calendar, and ordered flowers for Samantha Palmer, who he was apparently taking to the opera the following night. Her name had popped up on the calendar on my desktop over lunch. So much for Lacey Collins; it sounded like the AIDS benefit might be their last date.

"Jory!"

My head snapped up and I realized she was sobbing.

"Jesus, what's with you?"

"He's ruining my life!"

"What?" I was confused.

"Jory, he—"

"Oh c'mon, Sonja." I half-laughed because it was ridiculous. "He doesn't want you and you're hurt for whatever reason. Just get over it already. Go home, and tomorrow you can start a new job with a new boss and forget all about Dane Harcourt."

"I'm really crazy about him, though."

And I looked at her and got it. She was one of those pretty girls that was used to having men fall at her feet. What she didn't get was that she wasn't even in his league. Even to date. "Oh for crissakes, get over it." I sighed, tired of the topic. "You've got no chance with him."

"Jory, I have—"

"Please," I scoffed at her. "He's a fantasy. No one actually gets a man like that."

Of course, just as I said it, Dane stepped into the office.

We both realized that he had been standing just around the corner for several minutes. Heard everything. I sank into my chair; Sonja slunk out of the room, mumbling that she was off to see our office manager Debbie.

"Excellent," he told her.

I finally looked up and found that he was still towering over my desk. I had to tilt my head all the way back to see his face. He was staring at me hard, his eyes searching mine.

I saw the muscles in his jaw flexing, but he didn't say a word, just looked at me. It was unnerving, having his full and complete attention, and I wasn't at all sure that I liked it. I felt myself start to squirm.

"You're back early," I muttered.

"Who knew you thought so much of me."

"What?" I asked, pretending I hadn't heard him, hoping he'd give me the out.

"You heard me."

No such luck. I took a deep breath. "Yeah, well," I said, my eyes not turning from his steady gaze. "It comes and goes."

"So," he said, finally looking away. "Do I get to eat?"

I sighed loudly so he couldn't miss the irritation. I fished out his meal of hummus and couscous and falafel and all the rest of the stuff he loved. The smile I got was his real one; the one you hardly ever saw, the one that did the killer thing to his eyes where they went all liquid and warm.

"Enjoy your lunch, sir."

He looked down at me and I had no idea what else to do so I reached into the top drawer of my desk and pulled out my last pack of Pop-Tarts. I held it out to him.

"Are they Strawberry Frosted?"

"Aren't they always?"

He took it from me and walked into his office without another word. I sat there for a minute, thinking about what I must have sounded like when I was talking to Sonja. Like maybe I had a crush of my own going on.

"Hey," Jill called out to me from the hall.

When I looked up at her, she was smiling wide.

"Another one bites the dust, huh, baby."

I threw up my hands and she burst out laughing. And as I watched her walk away I realized that, even as Sonja had not been accepted, I was. The girls and me, we were in the grind together.

Jill, Celia, and I had gotten close after six months, Debbie being a tougher nut to crack. It took a whole year. In the end, though, it was one of those things. All three of them still coveted my job but nobody wanted me to go anywhere, either. When Piper started and seemed immune to my boss's charms, it felt like we were finally in the process of building a strong crew that was going to stick around. As I looked across at Sonja's empty desk, I realized that I would be meeting somebody new that week. I probably should have suggested to Debbie that she ask the temp agency to send over a guy.

Chapter Three

I had just stepped out of the shower when my cell phone rang. My friend Evan was on the other end. He reminded me that it was his birthday and I had better be at the club by nine. Like I would be late for a party.

Amnesia was a dance club on Halsted that I really liked. It was way over the top with the go-go dancers in cages, purple neon everywhere, and the bar that ran the length of one wall.

I saw Evan in his group of friends and crossed the floor to get to him.

"Hey, buddy," he smiled wide, grabbing me into a tight hug. "You came."

"Have I ever missed your birthday?"

"No," he said, looking me over. "You're the most dependable person I know."

"Good." I squeezed his shoulder tight. "So what's your plan for tonight?"

"First I gotta tell ya... I just saw Kevin."

I nodded slowly. "That's okay. I knew he'd be back this month at some point."

"But you're not pissed he's out at a club?"

I shrugged. "It's not my business anymore, E."

He nodded slowly, and then suddenly smiled. "What'd you get me?"

I pulled an envelope from my back pocket and presented him with two tickets to the ballet.

"Oh baby." He reached out and hugged me again. "When are we going?"

"Uh-uh," I shook my head. "Take your mom."

He gave me a look.

"You know you should. You never go over there and she lives like ten minutes away."

"She always wants to know who I'm dating. What am I supposed to say? I don't date Jory... I have sex in the back rooms of clubs. I'm not looking for anything serious."

"One of these days, Ev... love's gonna get ya."

"Not likely."

"Whatever." I shrugged. "Back to Mom. I bought the tickets for you and her."

"She drives me nuts."

"She's a lovely lady."

He grunted and slid an arm around my neck to pull me close. "Come say hello to the girls."

Evan's fellow flight attendants were catty and flirty and drank more than I thought possible. Three of the women and two of the guys propositioned me, and by the time midnight rolled around, I realized I was starving. I was on my way back from the bathroom when Kevin Wu stepped in front of me.

"Hey," I said, moving back so I didn't touch him.

"Jory." He smiled and reached for me.

I took another step back. "What's going on?"

His smile fell away and I saw his jaw clench. "You're still mad."

"I'm not mad," I assured him, because I wasn't. I truly could not have cared one way or another if he was there or not. "Good to see you," I said and brushed past him.

Last year Kevin Wu had told me he loved me. He'd taken me to a very romantic dinner and, after much hedging, blurted out that he didn't think he could stand it if I slept with anyone but him, for the rest of my life. At that point I wasn't on the same page, but in time I was almost certain I would have been. We had dated solid for six months and it was the closest I had ever been to a grown-up relationship. His only complaint had been that he wanted to sleep all night with me.

I wasn't ready for that step, and in the end I had been right.

When he told me he was coming out to his family I had eagerly gone along with him to offer support and meet them for the very first time. It had been a disaster. Not only did he chicken out, but he also told them I was just a friend. He ended up dancing with a girl his parents had invited, all night long. I was left alone at the table, and when I confronted him later that night he told me that I couldn't possibly understand since I was basically an orphan. I had no familial obligations.

When he wanted to get in bed with me, I asked him how stupid he thought I was. I could see the writing on the wall. I was not partner material. He agreed with me but went on to say that once he took his place in the family business that he would be able to set me up in style. Apartment, cash allowance, car... he would keep me very comfortably. I was so glad we were at his place so I could leave and thrilled that we had never exchanged keys like he'd wanted. We were done. I had obviously been suspended in some dream state for the entire course of our relationship. I was very thankful that the drugs or trance or alien mind meld had worn off so I could get back to my life and pretend that Kevin Wu had never happened to me.

"Jory."

I turned and waited while he caught up with me.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Evan. It's his birthday."

He looked confused. "Jory."

"What?"

"I wanna see you."

"Here I am."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

I shrugged and turned to go.

He grabbed my arm. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Jory, I—"

I peeled his fingers off my arm and got a few feet away before he caught me again and held on while he stepped around in front of me, blocking my escape.

"Don't be a jerk just because you can. Please let me see you."

"No."

Furrowed brows. "Jory," he argued. "C'mon, please don't—"

"Let me go, Kevin."

"Listen, I'm sorry I didn't call as soon as—"

"It doesn't matter." I brushed his hand off me.

"Why doesn't it matter?" He had miscalculated and there was the first glimmer of concern in his eyes.

"It just doesn't," I assured him.

He grabbed my arm fast, holding tighter the second time.

"Jory, just calm down, all right?"

"I'm calm, you're the one who's bein' weird."

"C'mon, J. All I did was think about you while I was gone."

His voice was rising as he spoke.

"That's crap. The only thing you thought about was the stuff I did to you in bed."

He smiled slyly and stepped in closer to me. "There was that."

Having not had a lot of partners, Kevin was much less experienced than me. My lovers numbered in the double-digits, and I had learned something I liked, or something someone else would enjoy, from each and every one of them.

What I had learned from Kevin was that I didn't want to trick anymore. Orphans wanted homes, and I was no exception. I wanted to belong to one man, just like every woman in every Hollywood three-handkerchief chick-flick I had ever seen. I didn't want to sleep around anymore.

The hand on my cheek startled me, and I looked up at Kevin. "Where did you go?" He smiled, stepping in close to me, both hands on my face.

"You're thinking so hard about something."

I lifted my chin out of his hands and pulled back. "Nothing.

I'll see ya."

"C'mon, J," he said gently, staring into my eyes. "I just want to talk to you."

I turned to go but he grabbed a handful of the front of my shirt and yanked me forward, off balance, so I almost fell into him.

"Jory," he whispered. "What can I do to—"

I stepped back before I pushed him away. "Get off me, man," I warned him, more annoyed than I probably should have been. I realized suddenly that I was in no mood for anything but being home on my couch. I definitely didn't want to be out at a club. I needed to spend some time processing everything in my head from the night before.

"Listen," Kevin said, holding onto my arm. "I'm sorry, all right. I didn't mean to... I really have been thinking about you like non-stop for—"

"You're bein' a dick," I cut him off, pulling free.

He got hold of me again, this time yanking on my arm hard. "Stop playing hard to get. We both know you're gonna give me whatever I—"

"Let go of him."

We both froze and turned to Detective Kage. He was standing there, looking at me with that permanent scowl of his, furrowed brows, deep lines between them, the smoky blue eyes cold, and his gaze pure irritation. I was amazed that Kevin still held onto me.

"What are you doing in here?" I asked him flatly, because that more than anything was amazing. Frankly, I was stunned.

"I could ask the same of you," he growled at me. "Is this your idea of laying low?"

"Oh." I was even more confused. "Is that what I'm supposed to be doing?"

"You know you are."

I raised my eyebrows. "I do?"

"Yeah, ya do."

"Huh."

He turned his gaze on Kevin. "Let him go. I'm asking nicely."

It wasn't so much the words as the look. Just standing there doing nothing he seemed menacing. Like a gunfighter or a samurai warrior... like the stillness could be broken at any second with violent movement. Kevin let me go and I took a deep breath.

Detective Kage put a hand on my shoulder. "Let's go."

"Wait," Kevin said, reaching for me.

"Please," Kage warned him, "I don't wanna hurt you." But you could just tell from his tone that he hoped Kevin would try.

"Hurt me?"

One eyebrow arched slowly.

Kevin's jaw clenched tight. "You think you could hurt me?"

It sounded like a dare.

"Oh hell, yeah," the detective said smugly, smirking the last.

In his street clothes, Sam Kage looked even bigger than he had in his shirt and tie the night before. The jeans showed off his long, muscular legs, his slim waist, the T-shirt clung to his wide chest and shoulders, tight across bulging biceps, triceps, the veins in his arms and hands visible. He had that v-shape to him, all solid, heavy, rippling muscle, and I realized that standing there in a gay dance club he probably had more than just Kevin and me looking at him. The slate blue eyes, short, golden brown hair, thick brows, full lips, chiseled jaw.... I had missed that the man was a walking

wet dream the night before. Probably because of the way he looked at me. Like he hated me.

"Who are you?" Kevin snapped at him.

Detective Kage just shot him a look before he gave my arm a tug. It was different from when Kevin had pulled; I nearly came off my feet. The man had no idea how strong he was.

He wanted to steer me out of the club but I darted over to Evan to say good-bye. When I put my hand on my friend's shoulder, he turned around to look at me. I saw his eyes fill with Detective Kage. He didn't even see me. I was an afterthought.

"Jesus, Jory who's this?" He sounded almost breathless.

I stepped sideways so I could introduce them. "Evan Rheems, this is Detective Sam Kage. Detective Kage, my buddy Evan."

He nodded but didn't hold out his hand. "Okay. Can we go?"

"Oh no, you can't go," Evan argued, reaching out, putting a hand on my wrist. "It's my birthday. Jory and I haven't even had our—"

"He's coming with me," Detective Kage said flatly and I felt his hand on the back of my neck. "So you'll hafta do whatever you people do another time."

"You people?" Evan looked at me, eyebrows raised, the question there in his gaze.

It felt like my right eye was twitching. "It's not; he's not with me, Ev. He's...."

"I'm done," he grumbled, and I felt his hand clench on the back of my neck. "Outside, now."

I leaned in and kissed Evan on the cheek, promised to call him the next day, and asked the detective to get his hand off me.

"If you walk toward the goddamn door," he barked at me.

I started toward the exit but a guy stepped in front of me.

"Hey," he smiled at me. "Do you remem—"

Heavy hands clamped down on my shoulders, squeezed tight. "Excuse us," he said behind me.

The guy looked up from my face and saw Detective Kage behind me. He moved out of the way and I got shoved forward hard.

Outside on the street I pivoted around to face him.

"What the hell was that about?"

"Why don't you just paint a goddamn target on your chest, you fuckin' idiot?"

I started away from him but he grabbed my arm and swung me back around to face him.

"Christ, can you stop manhandling me," I snapped at him, twisting my arm free, annoyed.

"Sorry," he said automatically, no sincerity at all; hands shoved down into his pockets. "But you're just not listening. I don't get you."

"Whatever." I sighed. "Listen, I gotta eat, all right, and then I promise to go home."

He nodded. "Fine."

I gave him one last look and then turned to walk away.

"Wait."

"God, what?"

"Will you stop please?"

I stopped but I didn't turn around.

"I gotta eat too."

I looked at him over my shoulder. "I'm getting breakfast.

You want that?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay." I smiled, turning to look at him. "Where's the tank you drive?"

I got just barely a smile, the slightest curl to his lip.

* * * *

I can talk when I have to and I had to at dinner. I kept up a steady stream of conversation, from *CSI* to how I was thinking of becoming a Catholic because I liked all the different saints. I had him try my banana pancakes and smiled wide when he admitted that they weren't bad.

"Christ, you talk a lot," he said under his breath.

I went silent and drank my orange juice.

"Hey."

I looked up into his silver-blue eyes.

"I didn't mean you should stop. You just remind me of my sisters, is all."

"That can't be good," I said, leaning back from the table.

"No," he said quickly. "It is actually."

I nodded and drained my glass. "So you want something else or are ya done?"

"I want something," he said, really looking at me.

And I got the weirdest feeling, which I was sure was just wishful thinking on my part, that maybe he was talking about me. Because even though the man obviously hated me, the man was gorgeous. Impossible for me not to notice the deep laugh lines around his eyes, the scar over his left eyebrow, or the way his clothes clung to him like a second skin. And even though I had complained earlier, the idea of him being rough with me was very exciting. Every guy that had ever tried to throw me up against a wall or down on a bed I had been able to get free of. Most of them didn't really want to be that physical anyway, didn't want to wrestle me into submission, it was all for show. But Detective Kage could make me do whatever he wanted. The defined muscles, his size, the look in the dark eyes all told me as much.

"Cold?" he asked when I shivered.

I shook my head and took a breath. "No, I'm good," I said, getting up, pulling out my wallet.

"I'll get it," he said stiffly, rising to stand beside me.

"Oh hell, no," I told him, putting twenty-five down. I had to cover the tip too. "I'd rather get shot than owe you anything."

He glared at me and I laughed before I gave him a pat on the arm. "I'll see ya."

His hand clamped down hard on my shoulder to hold me where I was. "I'll drive you home. Just stay."

So I stood beside him while he put his half down and then walked out ahead of him.

"You wanna cuff me so people don't think we're dating?" I asked him casually.

"No one in their right mind would think we were together."

"No?"

"Yeah, no."

"Why not?"

"Because." But he didn't explain, so I let it go.

The alley was dark but he was right behind me so I didn't worry. I saw his car as soon as we came out the other side and I was glad because I was starting to freeze.

"Can I ask you a question?"

I winced.

"What's with that?"

I tried to smile. "Sorry?"

"Don't say you're sorry when you're not. What's with the flinching? Whaddya think I'm gonna ask, for crissakes?"

"Something horrible."

He squinted at me. "Nice."

"It's like navigating a minefield," I muttered as we reached the SUV.

The car alarm chirped as the door opened and I climbed in.

I leaned over to crack his door for him and then buckled in before he barked at me.

"Why don't you have a fuckin' jacket?" he asked me curtly.

I shrugged. "I do, it's just not super cold yet. It's a pain in the ass to carry it to the club, check it, and then remember to get it after."

"So getting pneumonia is more your speed?"

"Detective, did you know that disease is actually caused by germs and not the cold?"

"Funny," he said flatly.

I leaned my head back and got comfortable. My phone rang and it was Kevin so I let it go to voicemail. Taylor called, and then Nick, but I didn't feel like talking. It was warm in the car and with both of us silent, I started to doze. When my phone rang again I put it on vibrate.

"That thing ever stop ringing?"

"Mmmm," I answered him, half awake.

"You're popular, huh?"

I grunted as he pulled the car out into the street. He got on his phone and I listened absently as he talked about times and dates. It was hard to imagine the life of a police detective. I wondered what it was like to have a job that could never be walked away from.

The car was warm, the ride was smooth, and there was the low hum of the tires on the road. I lost track of time.

"Jory."

I felt the back of his fingers slide up my throat, and I realized that the car had stopped.

"Shit, sorry." I took a breath, sitting up. Hard to know how long I'd been asleep. "I'm crap in cars. I always pass out."

"Me too, if I'm not driving," he said softly.

"Thanks," I said, my voice husky as I opened the door to get out.

"Hey."

I looked back at him.

"Watch yourself, all right?"

I nodded.

"You're an idiot for not going into the program."

"I don't want a new identity, Detective. I—"

He put up a hand. "Spare me, all right? Just try and be a little less visible."

I promised him I would work on it.

He muttered something I didn't catch.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Are you worried about me, Detective?" I asked hopefully.

"No," he grunted. "I just don't wanna find you with your brains blown out."

Which basically closed the door on my wishful thinking.

Chapter Four

People constantly surprise me. I understand when you're out at a club in the tightest, sexiest clothes you own that getting hit on is the response you're after. But fresh from the gym, hair still wet from the showers, hooked up to your iPod is not the time for someone to try and pick you up. So when a guy leaned against me at the salad bar the following night, I was scowling by the time I turned around to look at him. I had walked through my day at the office in a haze and went to work out in hopes that it would clear my head. I couldn't quite seem to start feeling like myself. Being accosted by strangers was doing nothing for my mood.

"Jory."

I waited. People knowing my name never puts me more or less at ease with them.

He smiled quickly. "Trey Wyndham. I met you at Richard's party last Saturday."

I had no idea who he was.

His lowered his voice. "You went home with me."

That bit of information was not designed to jog my memory. I went home with lots of people.

He cleared his throat. "You don't remember?"

It was rude to tell the truth in this situation. "No, I remember. How are you?"

Instant smile. "You were gone in the—"

"How are you?" I repeated, cutting him off.

"Oh... fine."

"Well, it was nice to see you again." I smiled, closing up my spinach salad and turning to leave. After having picked everything, I realized I didn't want it. It was typical of me.

"Wait."

I kept moving, but before I could walk toward the cashier, he stepped in front of me.

"Don't just dismiss me," he snapped irritably. "I want to talk to you."

I took out my other headphone and gave him my attention.

"You know what?" He moved out of my way. "Forget it."

This whole exasperated, annoyed look you're giving me is bullshit. I don't deserve to—"

I turned around him and started fiddling with my iPod again.

"Jory!"

I kept walking, not fast, just moving at my normal pace.

"Goddamnit, wait!" he yelled, suddenly in front of me again, barring my path.

I stopped. "Whaddya want?"

"I want you to not sound like you're bored out of your mind."

"Sorry," I said automatically.

"No, you're not." He forced a laugh. "I don't remember you being such an asshole."

"Okay."

He let out a sharp breath, raking his fingers through his hair. "Richard told me you eat at this deli a lot, so I've been sort of hanging out here and... I got your number from him but you never pick up and you don't return your messages and.... I just want to know what's up."

I squinted at him. "What's up is that I don't return calls to numbers I don't know, and the idea that you're stalking me is creepy as hell."

"What? No... I don't need to stalk anyone, I—"

"Fine, then I'll see ya."

But when I tried to walk by, he grabbed a fistful of my sweat jacket.

"Jory, I want to see you."

Was he kidding? "Are you kidding?"

He slowly released me. "That night was amazing. You... I'd like to—"

"I gotta go."

But again he stepped in front of me, making sure I couldn't leave.

"What the hell?" I groaned, hungry, annoyed, and tired. It was a bad combination.

"Why did you leave? Why didn't you stay?"

Since I couldn't place him, I went with what seemed logical. "We were done." It seemed self-explanatory to me.

"Jory, you—"

"Listen, man, I need to go, so—"

"Just wait," he said, his hands up to keep me from walking away.

"What are you doing?"

The sound of the voice, the level of irritation was unmistakable. I couldn't help the smile as I turned and found Detective Kage. "Hi."

He was scowling at me, which was the norm for him whenever he saw me.

"How are you?"

"I asked you a question."

"Excuse me, I was—"

"Fuck off," the detective told Trey before he grabbed my bicep and dragged me after him.

I didn't fight or argue or anything. I let him manhandle me because, for whatever reason, it felt good to be taken care of.

He made me feel protected and at that moment, I liked it.

He stopped suddenly and I had to tilt my head back to see his face. The man was very tall. "I can't decide whether you're stupid or just—"

"Thank you for saving me from that guy," I interrupted, staring up into his gray-blue eyes. "He was being a total dick."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "He just didn't want to take no for an answer."

"Seems like maybe that happens to you a lot."

"Maybe," I agreed.

He nodded slowly. "What is that salad?"

I chuckled. "From the sneer of contempt, I'm gonna assume you don't eat much salad."

"You would be right."

I glanced into the shopping basket he was carrying and couldn't contain my gasp.

"What?"

"Jesus," I looked at all the frozen food. "You're not gonna eat that, are you?"

"Yeah, why?"

I picked up one of the frozen appetizers. "Do you have any idea the kind of preservatives that are in this?"

"And I should care why?"

I looked back up into his eyes. "Detective, do you have any idea what this shit will do to your arteries?"

He grunted.

"And your cholesterol and your—"

"I don't eat salad."

"You don't hafta eat salad," I assured him. "But you could eat—"

He put up a hand. "I'm due at my buddy's house and he said to bring stuff."

"So you're planning to kill everyone?"

He rolled his eyes. "You know what, why don't you just mind your own goddamn business, buy your rabbit food, and I'll drop you at your place on my way."

I shrugged and turned to walk toward the cashier.

"Wait."

I looked at him over my shoulder.

He scowled at me for several minutes. "Shit. Show me what to get."

"What?"

"Don't be an ass, just show me."

But I wasn't trying to be a jerk. I was just surprised.

"You'll let me help?"

"Yeah."

I felt a weight suddenly slide off me. There was something about spending time with the man that lightened me. "Okay, then. What do you want to take over there?"

His scowl darkened. "Like I know. Just... I'll follow you."

I walked directly to the produce area and started putting things in his basket. I only ever bought organic even though it cost more because, as I had told him earlier, I didn't do preservatives. I put apricots in the basket and carrots and green beans and zucchini and plum tomatoes. He followed me all over the store, listening as I talked, telling him what to make with the ingredients I was getting. When I was done, having placed two bottles of Chardonnay into the basket last of all, I looked up at his face.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said flatly.

"About what?"

"That's just it, what the hell is a fritter whatever?"

"A frittata."

"What is that?"

"It's kinda like a quiche."

"So why not say quiche?"

"Cause it's different, not as heavy. More like a tart."

He groaned. "Whatever... you can come with me and make it yourself."

I was stunned.

"Christ, could your eyes get any bigger?"

"I'm sorry, what'd you say?"

"Just come with me." He was exasperated. "This way I can go to my friend's place since I'm late, you can eat, and then I'll dump you at home."

"Will your friends want me there?"

"They won't give a shit."

The idea of going home alone was not appealing in the least. The idea of going out to a club and sleeping with somebody else was not appealing either. The only thing I wanted to do was spend time with Detective Kage. He was new and interesting and just looking at him made heat race over my skin.

"Okay."

"Fine." He sighed like he was tired. I noticed then the dark circles under his eyes.

"Maybe you should go home to bed, huh?"

"Just get in line," he barked at me, shoving my shoulder to get my feet moving.

I went ahead of him into the line at the cashier.

I enjoyed people watching and seeing the woman count back his change was fun. The way her hands trembled, the sharp intake of breath when his eyes met hers, the flashing smile she gave him was very telling. I was not the only one who saw the appeal of Detective Kage. I wondered what his friends would be like.

* * * *

It was loud. There was football on in the living room, men drinking beer and yelling at the TV, music on in the kitchen and women talking in the dining room. The kitchen smelled amazing, and it was warm as several women moved around setting up appetizers. Sam shoved me into the room with the groceries, told them that I was going to make his part, and left me there.

I stared at them.

They stared at me.

"So," one of the women said, crossing her arms as she looked at me. "Whatcha gonna make?"

She had one eyebrow arched, daring me to say something... anything. I liked her instantly.

"Vegetable frittata."

"A what?"

"It's like quiche."

She nodded, holding out her hand for me. "I'm Megan."

I took the offered hand in mine. "Jory."

Her face softened and her eyes warmed. "So what's in the frittata?"

I explained about the eggs and vegetables and cheese.

"Sounds yum. I don't usually eat when I'm here."

"Me neither," one of the other women said. "It's disgusting what the guys call food."

Apparently the evening had evolved over the years from *Monday Night Football* with the boys to couples' night at whoever's turn it was to host. Pizza, buffalo wings, and beer had morphed into a potluck. From the sound of it, however, the men were still bringing frat-boy fare.

"I'm gonna cook," I announced, smiling as I walked to the sink and put down the bags. "Who wants to help me chop broccoli?"

Everyone did.

An hour later I stepped in front of Detective Kage and he slowly lifted his head until his eyes were on my face.

"Here ya go," I said, offering him the plate in my hands.

He took it, still staring up at me.

"It's good, try it."

"What is this?"

"It's the vegetable frittata, flatbread topped with goat cheese and tomatoes, and green beans with hazelnuts."

He nodded.

"God, what is that?" the guy sitting beside Detective Kage asked as he reached for the plate I had just surrendered. "It smells awesome."

"Get your own," he told him, elbowing his friend to keep him away from his food.

I grinned down at Detective Kage. "We have fruit salad for dessert, with a raspberry glaze."

"Okay." He exhaled before starting on his food.

I turned to walk back in the kitchen, but Megan, my new friend, stopped me.

"I'm going to open the wine."

"Perfect."

"Jory honey, this is so good," Linda, who had helped me cook, called from the dining room table. I got a chorus of agreement from everyone else. I ate in the kitchen with Megan and two others, all of us talking about food. They all watched me chop the berries and add the walnuts and almonds to the salad I was serving for dessert.

"I had no idea fruit salad could be whatever," Bethany, another of my new friends, said as she watched me. "I always just do boring old bananas and apples and oranges. You've got none of those in there."

I shook my head. "I hate all those."

"God, Jory, you're gonna make some girl very lucky."

I arched a brow for her and she giggled.

"Okay, some guy very lucky."

"How do you know Sam?"

I explained to them all that I was in a little bit of trouble and he was helping me out. They accepted my words without hesitation because he was a police detective and obviously straight. They didn't question me even for a second.

Even though I had cooked, I helped Darla, the hostess, clean up her kitchen since it was a disaster area. Just the number of empty beer bottles was staggering. I was looking at the very sad-looking herb garden on the windowsill when I felt someone behind me.

"It was good."

I looked over my shoulder at Detective Kage. "Thanks."

"You eat like that every night?"

"No." I shook my head. "I don't have a big enough kitchen or a big enough food budget."

He nodded. "Well, tell me when you're ready and we'll go."

"Sure. I just gotta look at Darla's wedding album. I promised I would."

His eyes were locked on mine, which had my heart slamming against my chest. The man took my breath away and he had no idea he was doing it.

"So I'll tell ya when I'm ready."

"Fine," he said before moving away.

Flipping through photographs later, I had Darla draped over my shoulder, Linda leaning against my right, and Megan with her hand on my thigh, leaning into me from the left. Two others were lying across the table to offer their memories from their friend's big day.

"Sorry to break this up, girls," Detective Kage said from behind me, "but I gotta go."

"So go," Megan told him. "Leave Jory, one of us will take him home."

His hands were suddenly on my shoulders. "Nope, he's gotta go with me."

They were sadder for me to leave than him.

As I said my good nights, receiving kisses from the women and handshakes and shoulder pats from the men, I was surprised when Detective Kage grabbed my bicep and hauled me out of the apartment in front of him. As we started down the stairs to the front door of the building, other people were coming up. Instead of stepping in front of me, he stepped behind and let me lead the way. Outside on the street, I was distracted by the man's closeness and so completely missed the bike messenger until he was flying by my face. I had the arm locked across my chest to thank for not being hit.

"Thanks," I said, reaching up to close my hands on his forearm. "I totally missed that."

"'Cause you don't pay attention," he growled close to my ear, which sent a shiver down my spine. I was certain every inch of my skin was covered in goose bumps.

I nodded.

"It's gonna get you in trouble one of these days."

"Yes, Detective."

"You need to be really observant and vigilant right now."

"Sure."

"You hafta be careful."

"I know."

"Okay."

I was trying to catch my breath.

"Are you cold?"

"No," I managed to get out, my voice low and throaty.

"The messenger startled you," he said, his arm tightening, drawing me back a fraction more.

I closed my eyes and went for it, leaning back into him, seeing what he'd do. I had nothing to lose and I had to know what he'd allow.

"You're shaking."

I was barely breathing.

"Come on." He patted my chest gently. "Let's go."

Without his body heat I was freezing in the street. I watched him move around the SUV and get in. I was frozen to my spot, not wanting to go anywhere else with him, knowing that my attraction was mine alone. I was his witness, nothing more.

The window made the whirring noise and lowered as he leaned across the passenger seat. "Get in the car, stupid, before you freeze your ass off."

Nice.

I trudged over to the car and climbed into the seat.

"What the hell were you waiting for?"

"A written invitation, obviously," I said sarcastically.

"God you're an idiot," he grumbled before he pulled the car into the street.

He had no idea.

Chapter Five

The following night I decided to take my friend Tony up on his drinking and dancing offer. Nothing else was working. I still felt like I was in a dream, like I was outside my body, watching. It made sense that maybe if I went to bed with someone that I would have to actually be engaged, and if I were maybe I would be me again. It was a theory that I tried to explain to Tony. He had no idea what I was talking about but he was a good sport about listening. And that in and of itself was amazing, since his attention span was practically nonexistent. He even mostly maintained eye contact.

It became immediately evident that dancing was not a good idea. I didn't want to be groped or mauled or grabbed. I wasn't in the mood to be put up against the wall in the bathroom. Drinking, on the other hand, had real possibilities.

So while my friends danced like spawning fish, I sat at the bar and drank. I watched them gyrating and twisting, bumping and grinding, and whenever they called out to me, I waved and smiled. Every guy that sent me a drink, I sent back. Every time I was leaned into, I shoved whoever it was off me. I elbowed one guy in the ribs because he wouldn't take no for an answer. But after a few hours of drinking, the alcohol finally did the trick and unwound me. Feeling good, I slipped through the crowd to join my friends on the dance floor. I saw that more people I knew had joined them, and my friend Ben in particular was there. I could always count on him to be funny and upbeat.

As usual, as soon as Ben saw me he was across the floor really fast. His hands were all over me as he grabbed me and hugged me tight.

"Jory.... I missed you."

I smiled at him as he stepped back and looked at me.

"Let's get this off," he said, stripping me out of my T-shirt, pulling it up over my head.

I grabbed it back from him, tucking one end down into my pocket before I stepped in close and pressed my groin into his. I was just fooling around, but it was fun, and in minutes his hands were tight on my hips and his face was buried in my shoulder.

"You're such a cocktease, Jory," he groaned, licking a line up my throat as his hands squeezed my ass through my jeans.

"I know." I laughed, rubbing against him to the catcalls and whistles of our friends.

"Oh fuck this," he half-yelled, suddenly grabbing the back of my hair and yanking me off the dance floor, dragging me back to the bar. Once there, he whirled me around to face him. "Go home, Jory, before I make a big mistake and ruin our—"

I put a hand around the back of his neck, pulled him close, and kissed him. It wasn't my best, there was really not a lot of effort put into it, but it accomplished my goal. His mouth opened and he shoved his tongue down my throat. One of his hands was on my neck, the other on the button fly of my jeans. His fingers were working fast to get it open enough to shove his hand down inside.

"Come home with me."

"Let's just go in the back."

He jerked away from me, his eyes on mine. "What are you talking about?"

I smiled slowly. "You've never fucked in the back room?"

"Yeah I've fucked in the back room," he snapped at me.

"But I don't wanna do that with you. I wanna take you home with me."

I shook my head, put a hand on his belt buckle. "Come on, you know you want it."

He shoved me back away from him. "I do want it, that's the problem. I want you, Jory, I always have, all of you."

I stared at him, understanding finally sinking into my alcohol-soaked brain. "So you want what?"

"I want you to come home with me."

"And do what?"

He looked confused. "You're not just some trick, Jory, or a one-night stand... that's not what I want from you. You know that."

I did, since when?

"Come home with me." He smiled, his eyes soft.

Funny that it was what I told myself I wanted. I had stopped seeing Kevin because he didn't want to be with me, but here was my friend Ben suddenly confessing that he wanted me, and Doctor Nick, who called continuously, also wanted me. People were ready to make commitments to me, and I was hesitating.

"Christ, I'm messed up."

"What?"

"Nothing." I shook my head. "I gotta go, man. I'll call ya, all right?"

"No, just wait." He forced a smile. "I'll go in the back with you. Who can say no to those eyes? Just... lemme get you another drink first."

But I was already turning to walk away. He couldn't take back what he'd said anymore than I could pretend that he hadn't said it. I had offered sex and he wanted commitment and that was all there was to it.

"Jory," he said, catching up to me, hand on my shoulder.

"Please stay... please."

I leaned in and kissed his cheek before patting it gently. I left him on the side of the dance floor.

Outside on the street, I was pulling on my T-shirt when it was suddenly yanked down over my head, fast and rough. I looked up and found Detective Kage.

"Oh... hi."

"Hi," he said snidely like it was the lamest greeting ever. "I can't wait to hear this."

I pointed into the club. "I was in there dancing and I came out because—"

"What part of laying low don't you get?"

"I just wanted to have fun."

"And are you?"

There was no snappy comeback for that.

"Did you take something?"

"No, why?"

"Your eyes are all glassy."

"I just drank a lot."

"A lot? Like how much can you drink before you're wasted?"

"You'd be surprised."

He looked me up and down. "What do you weigh, like a hundred pounds dripping wet?"

"More like one forty."

"I'll believe one twenty."

I shrugged. "I'm heavier than that, I'm all muscle."

He laughed and the sound sent hot blood straight to my groin.

"I am."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose before giving me all his attention again.

"C'mon, I'll drive you home before you freeze to death out here."

"That's okay." I shook my head. "I'm kinda hungry. I'm gonna eat and then I'll go home."

"You should let me take you home."

I shook my head, shoving my hands down in my pockets, walking around him to head toward the diner on the next corner.

"Jory."

I stopped walking but didn't turn.

"Don't be a dumb-ass. I'll take you to eat."

Which made me smile in spite of myself. "Where's the car?"

His hand closed on the back of my neck and I closed my eyes so I could concentrate on the pressure of his fingers and the feel of his warm skin on my own chilled flesh.

"You're gonna freeze out here."

The trembling had nothing to do with anything but him.

"Get in the car."

He usually just barked at me and walked around the car, not waiting while I got in. So I was surprised when he reached around me and opened the door, holding it ajar from the top as I climbed up into the passenger seat. I leaned across the driver's seat to unlock his door. When he slid in behind the wheel, he immediately turned the car on and got the heater blowing full blast.

"So what do you wanna eat?"

"Italian?"

He smiled at me. "Okay, I know a place. You're gonna like it."

Just the fact that he cared that I would or not was good enough for me.

"You got your phone on you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I want you to have my number and my partner's, just in case you need to call us."

I would have liked it better if he'd wanted me to have just his number, but I pressed buttons as he gave them to me and didn't say another word.

As I sat through dinner I wondered about my reaction to Detective Kage. As a rule straight men did not appeal to me at all. I wasn't one of those gay men that thought that any straight man given the right circumstances, like enough alcohol, could be persuaded to try a walk on the wild side. I truly believed that you were born either heterosexual or homosexual and there was no fighting it whichever way you were. Sometimes realization came later in life, but everyone knew the truth in his or her heart. So it was weird that every second I spent with Detective Kage made me want to strip off all

his clothes that much more. But no good could come out of my infatuation, so it was best to cut it off before I made a fool of myself.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Sorry." I forced a smile. "No."

"I asked if you liked the lasagna."

"Yeah." I sighed, taking a deep gulp of my water. "It's great."

"What's the matter with you? You're usually a lot noisier."

I wasn't fun or interesting, just noisy. This was getting better and better.

"Why aren't you talking?"

I shrugged.

"If you're worried about the case, I can—"

"No," I said, cutting him off, getting up. "I just gotta go to the bathroom."

"So go, no one's stopping you."

"Where is it?"

He pointed over his shoulder.

I decided on my way back to the table that I would thank him for dinner and get out of there. He didn't need to drive me home; I could get there myself. And it looked like it would be even easier to slip away when I noticed the other four men crowded into the booth. I didn't want to walk over there, so instead I went right out the front door. I called him from the street.

"Where are you?"

"I left."

"You left?"

"I saw your friends, I didn't wanna put a cramp in your night, so I bailed."

"Wait, you—"

"Thanks for dinner. It'll be my treat next time."

"Whatever," he said and hung up.

And there was no reason for me to be hurt or frustrated, since we had a professional relationship and nothing more.

But I couldn't help it. I thought seeing him was more than a coincidence, like he was purposely showing up where I was. It would be romantic that way. But romance and Detective Kage had never been introduced. I was living in my fantasy world alone.

My phone rang and it was my friend Wade, calling to get me to join him and some others at a club downtown. It was still relatively early, not even midnight, so I told him I'd be there and caught a cab. It made little sense to leave a gay club to go to a straight one since I was, after all, gay, but I didn't really care and it didn't really matter. I needed to put some space between Ben and me, and Detective Kage and me, and being across town from both of them sounded like just the greatest idea ever.

I didn't feel like dancing, I really was not good company, but I sat with my friends Eddie and Parker and the three of us watched Wade and Gretchen dance while we drank. And drank. My only interest was in getting as much alcohol into my system as was humanly possible, and my friends were in complete agreement with me.

An hour later I was past the point where I could walk and talk and do anything but lean my head in my hand and people-watch. I squinted really hard when I saw Detective Kage weaving through the crowd behind a line of people. I closed one eye, opened it, and then tried the other, just to make sure I wasn't seeing things. What the hell was he doing at a club?

He saw me, turned to lean in close to the women beside him before crossing the room to my table. It looked like he yelled when he stopped to stand over me but I couldn't hear a word over the pounding remix of a song I knew but couldn't name. I waved up at him and the scowl was instant. That he could maintain his level of intensity was amazing, the energy it took more than I could fathom. I put my head down on my folded arms.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked, his breath warm in my ear, his knee bumping mine before his thigh as he slid into the booth beside me.

I didn't answer.

"Put your head up and look at me."

I rolled it sideways but didn't lift it up.

"Tell me what you're doing here."

"You first."

He growled, which sent a flush of heat over my skin. "My friends wanted to go dancing."

This was by far the biggest revelation of the night. "Do you know how?"

And I thought the look couldn't get any darker.

I chuckled. "Sorry, you better go."

"I want you to go home."

I shrugged. "Somebody'll take me home, Detective, don't you worry."

He stared at me a long minute before he got up.

"Jory!"

I lifted my head then so I could see my friend Eddie.

"Jory, c'mon, Wade's gettin' his ass kicked in the bathroom."

"Only at a straight club," I muttered as I got up slowly to follow him. "This kinda shit never happens at a gay club."

I trailed after Eddie, zigzagging through the crowd, keeping up a running commentary about how if we were in a gay club the word "bitch" would have been volleyed back and forth and then everyone would have walked away. At straight clubs, however, fists flew instead of insults about what you were wearing.

Eddie went through the door but before I could follow, a heavy hand was clamped down on my shoulder. When I turned my head, Detective Kage was there.

"Lemme go, I gotta—"

"And you're gonna do what?" he snapped at me, shoving me aside, pinning me to the wall. "Don't move."

"Wait, I gotta help my—"

He pressed his hand hard against my chest and I could feel the cold cement through the thin fabric of my spandex T-shirt. "He'll be right out. Don't you fuckin' move."

I nodded and he threw open the door and disappeared inside. Not even a minute later Eddie came out, trailed by Wade and finally Detective Kage.

"Thank you." Wade sighed, pressing some paper towels against his bottom lip as he stared at the police officer.

"Really."

He nodded before his eyes flicked to me.

"Jory." Eddie laughed nervously. "You didn't tell me you brought backup."

"I didn't know I had."

"Detective Kage scared the shit outta those guys!"

"They deserve it," Wade grouched, balling up the bloody paper towel in his hand. "That asshole's been hittin' on Gretchen all night and he saw she was with me—what the hell?"

"Never follow a guy into a bathroom," Detective Kage warned him.

"Unless you're in a gay club," I countered. "And you're invited."

"Because," he said loudly, trying to keep the conversation serious. "You never know where his friends are. There were four other guys in there."

Wade nodded. "I'll keep it in mind, Detective."

"Thanks again," Eddie said quickly.

"Yeah, thanks man," Wade chorused, grabbing hold of the front of my T-shirt and tugging me after him. "Let's go get something to eat and—"

But I was yanked backwards out of my friend's grip. I felt like a rag doll pulled in two directions at once.

"Jory ate already. I'll take him home, you guys go ahead."

They would have argued with me. They didn't argue with Detective Kage. They both hugged me good night, I got the guy clench times two, and then they were gone. I stood motionless as Detective Kage walked around in front of me.

"Thank you for saving Wade."

He didn't say a word, just stared down at me.

"You don't hafta take me home."

"Clearly I do if I want to make sure you get there in one piece."

"What are you talking about? I didn't get hurt."

"But you would have."

And maybe I would have but I would never admit to it.

"Come with me."

I followed him back out into the crowded club and we found the table where the rest of his friends were. There were three guys, counting him, and five women. I had no idea what the dynamics were, who was with whom, or if they had just met out, or if the guys had just attached themselves to the women, I didn't know but I definitely didn't want to intrude.

"Sit," Detective Kage ordered me after he sat down on the long sectional.

I obediently took a seat beside him. He didn't introduce me—it would have been impossible anyway, as loud as it was—and when drinks were ordered I got a mineral water. He was hilarious.

Sitting there, I got to do more people-watching, which I always enjoyed. Two of the women at the table tried to get Detective Kage to dance, without success. The woman on the other side of him was more subtle than the others; she leaned close to him to talk, slid her hand over the sleeve of his shirt, touching him to emphasize whatever point she was making. But when he moved to make room for the others coming back from the dance floor, he ended up closer to me, plastered to my side from shoulder to knee.

"You cold?"

I shook my head. I had to quit trembling every time he touched me.

"Then what?"

I had to think of something quick. "Nothing, I was just thinking... doesn't the way we're sitting remind you of one of those horrible high school

dances?"

He shook his head, slouching down on the seat.

We were at eye level when I turned to look at him. "Never a wallflower?" I teased, smiling.

"No."

I nodded. "Big jock, huh?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Football? Lineman maybe?"

"Left tackle."

"Whatever that is." I chuckled, crossing my arms. "You were popular so you didn't have to work at it like the rest of us."

"And how long've you been out of high school, Jory?"

I squinted at him. "I'm twenty-two... I told you that."

He grunted.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-four."

"You're young to be a detective, aren't you?"

"Not really."

"Yeah, but don't you—"

"Sammy, dance with me!" a woman yelled as she took a seat on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and straddling his hips. It was a neat

trick considering she had a dress on.

"Oh-kay." I stood up, not wanting her knees on me or the mojito she was holding to get dumped in my lap. "I think I'm gonna go."

He just looked at me. Just that much distance made it too hard to hear.

I walked around him to get to the ear she wasn't blowing in and leaned down close to him. "I'm gonna go. I hafta work in the morning."

He reached up and fisted his hand on the neck of my T-shirt. "I'll take you."

"But...." I gestured at the woman in his lap. "Hello."

I actually got a grin before he yanked me down beside him.

"Sit."

"You know, I really—"

"Shut up."

I felt my brows furrow as he lifted the woman from his lap and set her on the couch to his left. He moved her like she weighed nothing at all. I was smaller than her; he could carry me wherever he wanted.

"Let's go."

It was agony to spend another minute with him but there was no way to leave without a scene. So I allowed myself to be steered, once again, out of yet another club to the street.

Before I could even shiver, I was wrapped up in a cocoon of warmth.

"Keep that on 'til we get to the car."

His peacoat swallowed me, falling to my knees, hanging long over my hands, but as he had been leaning back against it for more than an hour in

the club, it had absorbed all his body heat. It smelled like him too. I sighed deeply.

"See," he grumbled at me. "You need to carry a damn coat."

Or get an even better accessory, a man that had a coat.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes, Detective, I heard you."

In front of my apartment a half an hour later, I was standing in the street, shivering, as I had given back his coat, and leaning against the driver's side door.

"Thank you so much," I told him, my hands squeezing both the outside metal of the door and the leather interior.

"You were great with my friends and I really appreciated dinner."

He nodded.

I smiled at him. "Maybe tomorrow you can have the night off from seeing me. That'd be good, huh?"

He let out a deep sigh, his eyes locked on mine. "You're exhausting."

"Yeah, I know. My boss says that too."

"Speaking of which—it's like three in the morning—how are you even gonna get up for work?"

"I just will, because if I don't Dane Harcourt will murder me."

"That would save me a lot of work."

I leaned back from the car. "I'm sure but still... thank you."

He moved so fast I didn't even realize he had my wrist for a second. "You need a leash."

"Whatever you want, Detective," I assured him breathlessly.

He shoved me back and drove away without another word.

I wondered what he was thinking.

Chapter Six

There was just enough caffeine to carry me through my day. It helped that Dane had errands for me to do from the time I got in to the time I went home. I was in perpetual motion, running, so I never sat down long enough to fall asleep. But on the train I drifted off and ended up two stops from where I was supposed to be. I had left my wallet at home that morning, as well as put on two different colored socks, so I had no money to get a cab. But walking was fine in the crisp autumn air. I liked the smell of fall and the chill revived me. Flipping the collar up on my cashmere trench coat, I darted across the street toward home. I had been invited out to dinner by Nick but had turned him down. Kevin had called three times, Ben five, and Wade and Eddie wanted to have a "thank you for saving our ass dinner" for me.

Nothing sounded appealing besides eating cereal and falling asleep in front of my TV. But it was not to be.

Halfway home I got a call from my friend Jenna, reminding me that I was supposed to be at her boyfriend Tim's birthday party in an hour. They were having it at a pool hall just like he wanted, and I had better not even think about blowing her off, since I was in charge of bringing the cake. She reminded me that I had volunteered over a month ago. And I was certain that a month ago it had sounded good, sounded like it would be no big deal. But now it was a huge deal, practically horrifying in its detail. The hoops I would need to jump through at this late hour to accomplish my task were beyond all imagining. Like changing and catching a cab and carrying and balancing something awkward. It was whiny and petty but I was tired. I swore all the way home.

Fortunately, Dane had caterers all over the city that loved him and would do anything for him, day or night, whenever he asked. Dropping his name was cheating, but I told myself it was okay since it was for a good cause. When I showed up at The Stick House an hour later, Jenna was mad for a second before she saw the cake. All was forgiven as she looked at how intricately it

was decorated and saw the many layers. I got a lot of praise lavished on me by everyone. I appreciated it even as I found a barstool against the wall. Shaking my head no, I declined the many offers to play pool and instead just sat and people-watched. I crossed my arms and relaxed, meaning to only close my eyes for a second.

The shaking woke me because it wasn't gentle. I opened one eye before tilting my head back, finding myself looking up at the jaw of Detective Kage.

"Shit," I groaned, straightening up too fast, throwing myself off balance. I would have pitched forward to the floor if he hadn't put his arm across me to bump me back into the wall. He did it like you do when you're in the car and you stop suddenly, putting your arm in front of the other person like that action will save their lives, keeping them from flying through the windshield.

"Are you even awake?" he asked me irritably.

"Yes," I snapped at him, annoyed that he was there. I had told myself that I would stop fantasizing about him and so had wanted to put a lot of time and distance between us. The fact that he had materialized out of thin air was unnerving.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm with my friends."

"Then go be with them."

He ignored me completely. "You were sliding down the wall when I came over here."

I didn't want to talk to him.

"You were passed out next to me."

I hopped down off the barstool, nearly falling until he steadied me with a hand on my arm.

"Careful."

I rolled my shoulder so he'd have to let go and walked away.

I found Jenna and kissed her good-bye, surprised Tim by kissing him as well before walking out of the pool hall. I was debating whether to get a cab or take the train when I heard someone calling me. I turned around as Detective Kage jogged up in front of me.

"I should take you home."

"No, you shouldn't," I said irritably, angry for no good reason. "Go back in and hang with your friends. I'm not some damn charity case."

"Okay," he agreed like he could have cared less and then turned around and left me.

I was really happy and really sad at the exact same time.

Because even though I knew that logically he needed to go away, I still wished he had stuck around.

I stood there in front of the pool hall raking my fingers through my hair and just breathed. I was restless and tired and hungry. My emotions were all over the place and the best thing for me to do was be alone. But I didn't want to be alone. I wanted company. Soothe-my-nerves company. I tried to think of someone to call.

"What are you doing?"

I turned my head to look at Detective Kage. He was back.

"I asked you a question."

I let out a long exhale of breath. "I'm thinking."

"Jesus, don't start now."

"You're hilarious. You should do stand-up."

He smirked at me. "I thought you were going home."

"I never said I was going home."

"So what are you doing?"

"I told you... I'm thinking."

"About what?"

"Who to call."

"Who to call for what?"

"Company."

He squinted at me. "Why call anyone? I'm offering you a ride home."

"But I'm hungry."

"I'll feed you."

I scoffed, smiling at him. "No wonder you wanted me to go into the witness protection program. Feeding us people has got to be expensive on a policeman's salary."

"You're the only witness I've ever fed."

I just looked at him.

"Don't read anything into it."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Detective."

His brows furrowed as the muscle in his jaw twitched.

"I'm gonna let you get back to your friends," I breathed out, brushing past him, starting across the parking lot, heading toward the street.

He grabbed me fast, whirling me around to face him.

"You're tired, so you're way over sensitive. Why don't we eat and then I'll drive you home."

"No, I don't need your—"

"C'mon." He smiled at me, slowly drawing me closer to him. "Please."

"You just wanna make sure nobody shoots me in the head."

He chuckled. "There is that."

I let out a deep breath as he grabbed the front of my heavy wool fisherman sweater. "Okay."

"Good," he said softly, pulling me after him.

I was comfortable in his monster car; the smells were familiar, the dashboard and the view from the top of the world.

"What about your friends?"

"Duty calls, they get that."

I was a duty then; how very flattering.

"Try and stay awake okay?"

I nodded. I would really try.

Chinese food sounded the best so we stopped at a good place in Oak Park. He talked about his day and I told him how many errands I had run for Dane in one eight-hour period. It was nice just swapping information that wasn't so much vital as just banter. I was getting used to him, to having

him around, and as much as I knew it was a mistake to get attached, I was having a lot of trouble not doing so.

"What are you thinking now?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"Lot of sighing and watering eyes for thinking about nothing."

"My eyes are watering because I'm yawning and tired, no other reason."

"You're really a piece of work," he said, exasperated.

"Whatever."

"Get up, let's go."

Back in the car I was wide-awake, getting my second wind. I was silent though, not wanting to fight with him, afraid that I would for no good reason other than to keep him there. It was juvenile, so I clammed up in hopes that he would just drop me off and drive away. When he stopped in front of my apartment, I muttered out a thank you and grabbed the door handle. But the hand on my shoulder stopped me and I turned my eyes back to him.

He cleared his throat. "You know what? I think maybe I should go in and check your place out to make sure it's secure and all."

"Sure," I said quickly, my mind racing all over again. Did he want to come in to just come in, or did he want to come in and get in my bed?

"Are you all right?"

It was just stupid wishful thinking... although, why not check out my place a week ago? "Yeah, I'm just a little out of it."

He nodded like he agreed and I climbed down out of the car.

"Where are you going?" he asked me as we started across the lawn together.

"What?"

"Something wrong with the front door?"

I pointed to the side. Obviously he'd never stayed and watched me go in. I'd wondered about that. "I can't get to my apartment that way."

He shot me a look.

"What?"

"Are you kidding?"

I walked around the side, behind the house, and started up the wooden stairs.

"Wait," he said, like he was exhausted.

I stopped moving.

"Lemme get this straight," he said quickly, his voice strained. "You walk behind the house in the dark, up these stairs to the top where you can't see shit?"

I turned around to look down at him. "Yeah."

"Move," he ordered gruffly, sliding around me so he could go first. "For crissakes, Jory."

He sounded more exasperated than mad. I didn't see the problem.

"How stupid are you?"

What was the correct response to that?

He went up in front of me, took my keys, and opened the door. "Are you fuckin' kidding me?" he asked when the door swung open to reveal a wall and stairs to the left.

"Why? What now?"

He stepped sideways to look at me. "You can't even see up these."

My studio apartment that I'd lived in for the past two years had been originally converted from an attic to a residence. To make a separate entrance, the owner had basically made a hole in the side of the wall leading up to the very top floor under the roof. There was, however, no room for a door to open *in* so it opened *out* like a giant cabinet. The first thing you saw, because it was all that could fit, was a coat rack.

There were eight stairs to the left that hugged the wall and emptied out into my small living room.

It was basically a small space where my TV and coffee table were against one wall and the kitchen sink was on the other. I could wash dishes under a small round window that looked out on the backyard, the stove had only one burner, and there was no shelf inside the oven. My tiny microwave sat on the only piece of counter space in the apartment and the one cupboard was above that. My kitchen table was a card table and the two chairs that went with it my friend Ilise had sponge-painted over the flat black with gold. It looked odd but I liked it. My queen-size mattress and box spring sat on the floor instead of in a bed frame, so I was constantly lining them back up when they moved. A bed frame was near the top of my list of things to buy. The down comforter had been my Christmas present to myself, and just looking at it made me want to change and get under it.

"Okay, I get it," Detective Kage breathed out. "You live on your own."

"Yeah," I said flippantly. "What was your first clue?"

And he launched into me about how I would never know if someone was coming up the inside stairs let alone those on the outside. I made the

mistake of rolling my eyes and he grabbed ahold of my sweater and yanked me forward so we were face-to-face.

"This place is a joke, Jory. Anybody with a paperclip could get in here."

"I disagree."

"You disagree?" He raised his eyebrows. "Because you know everything about breaking and entering."

"Calm down," I told him. "Have some tea."

"I don't want any fuckin' tea, I want—"

"Why have you been following me around?"

"What?" he barked at me, but already I was getting hopeful again. He obviously liked me, didn't mind my company, and was purposely baiting me to stay and argue.

"You heard me."

"You're my goddamn witness, you fuckin' idiot."

I nodded. "Sit down and stop swearing."

"I don't wanna sit down! I don't want tea...." he trailed off.

I smiled at him because I knew I was right. He might not know what he wanted, but I did. "Sit. I'll make the tea."

"I don't want tea," he repeated for the third time before sitting.

I filled the kettle with water but left it on top of the microwave before I walked back to stand over him. He looked up slowly, and when I stepped between his legs he didn't say a word. I sank to my knees in front of him and my hands went to his belt buckle. I checked once to make sure I was right and I saw him swallow hard, take the trembling breath.

When I tugged him forward, he let me move him, sliding down so that his muscular thighs were on both sides of me.

When I pushed his shirt up, I leaned over and kissed the six-pack abs, my lips brushing over his navel. He shivered hard and I smiled, because if there had been a time to protest it was over now.

I unbuckled his belt, and when I unzipped his jeans I realized how hard he was. As soon as I pulled down his briefs, I reached into my pocket for the condom there. He shivered once when he heard me tear open the foil wrapper and I realized that he'd been waiting for this moment. He could have run if I didn't have protection, his last credible excuse for flight. No going back when he was safe under the cover of latex. He watched my hands on him, gentle but firm without a hint of hesitancy. When his eyes came up, locked on mine, I saw how clouded they were, how steeped in need. I smiled before I lowered my mouth over him and he slipped inside the wet heat of my mouth. I loved what I was doing, liked it with everyone, enjoyed it, the power it gave me, the way they looked when I did it. But it was different for once because of the man. It had to be perfect for him, perfect for Detective Kage, who—for whatever reason—trusted me with this, his first time with a man. So I gave myself over completely to his pleasure, drawing it all out for long minutes as his panting began. It felt good; I knew it did because I'd been told often enough that my mouth was amazing. As I stroked and caressed him I heard the sounds tear out of him.

Head back, eyes closed, his bottom lip quivering, I took a second to drink in the sight of him, lost in what I was doing to him. It was gratifying to know that I could make him feel like that. His breath came in gasps, his hips rocking forward, and after a few more seconds he groaned, his fingers tangled tight in my hair. I was there, unyielding, my rhythm unchanging until he swore, cried out, his back bowed as he arched up into me. I waited for his breathing to even out before I moved slowly away, careful not to spook him as I rose from my knees between his legs.

"Let me help you, all right?" I said gently, waiting for the slight nod.

He watched every move I made as I grabbed the box of Kleenex off the coffee table. He looked drugged with his heavy-lidded eyes and languid recline.

When all evidence was gone, I put my hands on my hips and waited.

"I'm not sick," he drawled out.

There were several ways to take that. I decided to clarify.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that condom was a waste of time."

Oh. "I always use one."

"Whaddya need not to, a note?"

Weird conversation. "Yeah."

He nodded, and then suddenly realized he was sitting there naked from the waist down. Standing quickly, he got his underwear and jeans back on, fiddling with his belt, fumbling around, making the buckle jingle.

I decided to take pity on him and allow him the clean getaway. "I'm having tea," I announced in the suffocating silence. "You better get home, Detective."

He just stood there, looking at me.

I had no idea what he wanted and it didn't seem like he did either. I turned to go to the stove.

He moved so fast, grabbing a fistful of my hair and yanking me back up against him. His arm snaked around my neck so I couldn't move.

"Oh-kay," I breathed out, because this I could work with.

"I don't know what to... if you were a... I don't know what to do!" His voice was raw and hoarse.

"Whatever you want," I said softly as he pulled my head back, every inch of my skin hot, ready to be touched. "Just..."

it's okay, whatever you do. You're not gonna hurt me."

His hand went under the collar of my shirt, sliding over my throat, my collarbone, down my chest. I couldn't breathe.

I felt him shiver before his other hand slid up my abdomen, first pulling the sweater free, he then slipped his hand underneath it to touch my skin.

"What do you want?"

But I couldn't speak.

He pulled the sweater roughly up over my head and then shoved me down on the bed. It was a rush to get me naked and he tugged and ripped until I was. I was forced facedown onto my mattress and pulled to the edge. I heard his buckle go and a second later he was against me.

"Tell me what to do," he said, his voice deep, barely there.

I drew his arm down, then curled his hand around me and let him feel the length of me sliding through his fingers, how hard I was, how silky the skin. "See how good you make me feel?"

He leaned over and I felt his mouth on my shoulder before he bit down. It hurt and made me gasp at the same time

"Oh, you like that," he said, leaning into me.

"I do," I said, showing him how to stroke me. "Now fuck me."

"But I... what if—"

"I'm clean and you were trying to tell me you are too, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"I never bareback, Detective—believe me, you're safe." He shouldn't have believed me but I was telling the truth. No one ever got near me without a condom. What I was offering him was a gift.

"I... Jesus, I don't—"

"We're both good, just do it."

"I don't wanna hurt—"

"You won't," I promised as I pointed at my nightstand.

"There's lube in there. Get it."

He did as he was told, and when he had the small bottle in his hand his eyes locked on mine. "Come here." I was gentle, moving slowly because he was watching so intently as my hands slid over his skin. When his eyes finally lifted to mine, they were heavy-lidded as he lengthened in my hand, his breath shaky. I turned and bent over the bed and I felt his hands sliding over my ass, opening me up before he eased inside. I brought his slick hand back to me and he stroked me at the same time for as long as he could.

"Jesus, you're so tight."

"I feel good."

"So good," he groaned, his hands moving to my hips, holding me there.

It didn't take long before he called my name, his hips snapping forward before he pinned me under him to the bed.

"Holy shit," he gasped, careful as he slid out of me, caring now that he could think again.

I rolled over on my back and was ready to take care of myself when he stopped me. I smiled slowly. "You gotta let me do this," I panted, my laughter forced. "I could die from...."

"I'll do it. I want to."

I shook my head. "No, I'll—"

But he was insistent to reciprocate, pulling my hands away, moving between my legs and taking me into his mouth. He had no idea what he was doing but it still felt like heaven, and the fact that he wanted to, coupled with his eyes locked on mine, checking to make sure it was good for me, took me right to the edge. I warned him to stop and he moved, watching me finish. When my eyes slowly drifted back open, I was surprised to find him staring at my face.

"What?"

"I made you feel good." It was a statement.

"Yes."

He nodded slowly.

"Are you okay?" I asked him gently, smoothing the hair back from his forehead. The way he was looking at me made my stomach hurt, so trusting and peaceful.

"Yes," he nodded as I got up off the bed.

I took longer in the bathroom than I needed, giving him time to escape, allowing for the clean getaway. I was surprised to find him unmoved, still on his back and staring at the ceiling, when I finally emerged. I was halfway to the loveseat when he spoke and stopped me.

"Come back to bed."

I went to the opposite side, close to the wall, and lay facedown. I was trying to figure out what to do next when I felt his fingers slide slowly down my spine.

"I never did that before."

And I was going to tease him, but the moment was precious even if there was only ever this one. "I know."

"How did you know? Was it bad?"

"No."

"I wanted it to be."

"But it wasn't." *I made sure.*

"No."

Long silence.

"I didn't... I didn't know it would be like that."

"Like what?"

He ignored my question. "We were good, right?" Like he needed his own assurance.

"Yes," I agreed.

He cleared his throat before he pressed his hand against the small of my back. "Do you... do guys... can you make it so you can be on your back?"

"Yes," I exhaled slowly. "I just thought maybe you wanted it so you couldn't see my face."

"No, if we could, when you can, I... when you're ready, I'd like to see."

"Get up."

He did what I told him without question and he had the bottle of lube before I could say a word. I had him move to the edge of the bed and then lift my legs and rest them on his shoulders. He ran his hands from my thighs up my calves to my ankles; first gently, then harder, his fingers clenched, the knuckles white. He was going to leave bruises on my skin.

"I'm sorry I bit you."

"I'm not," I said, directing him, giving him permission to do what he wanted. He caught his breath, his eyes locked on mine as he pushed himself inside me,

The pain was white-hot for the instant before it wasn't. It felt so good I cried out.

"I hurt you," he whispered, trying to move away.

"No... and yes," I breathed out, keeping him still, tightening my muscles. "But that's how it always is."

"You should see your eyes."

I smiled up at him, telling him how he should move, slowly then faster, pushing in deeply so I could feel him. His hands and mouth on my body were rough and hard, and when I let the moan rise up out of me he lifted me off the bed and sat. I put my knees on either side of his thighs and lowered myself onto him.

"Jory," my name sounded like a prayer.

Like the easy rise and fall of a wave, I was fluid in his arms, his fingers tracing down my spine, his hands moving over my hips, my ass, and his mouth sucking and licking down my chest. The way he was looking up at me, like I was a revelation, a gift. But there were crazy boundaries that sometimes couldn't be crossed. Like fuck but don't kiss.

"Open your eyes."

I didn't remember closing them. Gazing into the silvery blue of his eyes, I realized he wasn't rushing me or trying to get away. He wanted everything slow.

"Jory... kiss me," he breathed out, hands sliding up my throat, cupping my face in his hands, touching my hair. When my mouth covered his, he parted his lips for me and I kissed him deeply, thoroughly, exploring his mouth, sliding my tongue over every inch of his, tasting him, devouring him. I heard the catch of breath as I pulled back.

"Detective," I began. "I—"

"Sam," he corrected me.

"Sam," I said slowly, liking the sound of his name on my lips.

"You're brand-new," he said to me, and I understood what he meant. To him it was a whole new world of discovery, my body just waiting for him.

"Come here."

The man knew how to kiss; I felt his craving and heat. He laid claim to me; I was bruised, my lips mauled and chewed.

Easily the most desired and needed I had ever been. I arched my back and let my head fall back in his hands. He had me; I wouldn't fall, his arm around my waist anchoring me down.

* * * *

I woke up because I couldn't move. When I lifted my head I realized the reason. Sam had one heavy, granite thigh draped over my legs and his arm around my waist. I waited for the panic to come. And waited. And waited. When it didn't come after several minutes, the truth finally sunk in. Being pinned under the man felt right, natural, and that was a revelation both terrifying and overwhelming at the same time.

What was it about Sam Kage that brought all my walls crumbling down? And even though I had no idea, I did know that I had to be alone to figure it out. I needed the man out of my bed. When I pushed against him he rolled off of me, but the arm that had been under my cheek curled around my shoulder and brought me over on top of him. He tucked my head under his chin before smoothing his hand down my spine.

"Are you awake?"

"No," he growled, his voice full of gravel, patting my ass a minute before he pulled the comforter up and covered us both. His arm around my back left me unable to move as he rubbed his thigh between my legs.

"Sam, you gotta go. I don't sleep with—"

"I'm not going anywhere," he promised, his voice soft, hoarse, half asleep.

"You can't—"

He kissed my forehead and then my nose. "Close your eyes."

And I thought that there was no way I could, but his big, hard body was so warm and the beat of his heart so strong and steady and his fingers sliding through my hair... it was all too much. I couldn't have kept my eyes open if my life depended on it.

"You're safe with me," he said softly. "I promise."

"Sam, I—"

"Go to sleep. I'm here now. I'll take care of you."

And even though I thought it was the last thing I wanted, it was still nice to hear.

Chapter Seven

There was light from the windows in the room, and I turned my head to look out at the overcast sky. It was going to be another gray day in Chicago. I loved the dark days with the smell of rain in the air and the sky a comforting shade of clay. The sun always assaulted me. I liked the slower pace of a storm-washed sky. Turning, I laid my head back down on Sam's chest and listened to his slow in-and out-breaths and the steady rhythm of his heart. I had never been this close to anyone for such an extended period of time. His arms wrapped around me and he pulled me up, rubbing his chin in my hair. My face buried now in the hollow of his throat, my mouth resting on the warm skin of his neck. I didn't want to move because I didn't want the day to begin.

"Hey."

I tried to raise myself up off him, but the hand on the back of my neck kept me there, close.

"Jory."

I looked up at him as he yawned and stretched under me.

He gave me a lopsided grin before leaning close to kiss me.

"You should see your face." He smiled lazily, rolling over on top of me, pinning me to the bed. "You should see how you're lookin' at me."

I could only stare at him. Unbelievable that he was there. I never expected him to be there in the morning. I had expected him to run.

"Your eyes are... something."

He wasn't used to talking, to saying what he was thinking.

"Oh shit, that's what time it is," he yelled, suddenly having glanced at the alarm clock on my nightstand. He scrambled out of bed, almost doing a face-plant when he got tangled up in the sheets. He was a whirlwind of activity, running around my apartment, grabbing his belt off the couch, his shoes from under the bed, untangling his shirt from the down comforter.

I sat up and watched him dart around before he took the stairs and I heard the door slam as he went out. It was weird to go from all that noise to dead silence. Seconds later the door creaked back open and he was crossing my floor to flop back down in front of me.

"You didn't even lock the door, idiot. What if I was trying to kill you?"

I just stared at him.

"Don't look at me like I'm crazy. I'm not crazy."

I only nodded, squinting at him.

He leaned in and kissed me hard and fast before standing up and looking down at me. "What time do you get off work tonight?"

"Why?"

"I'm gonna come and get you."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why you wanna get me?"

"I'm gonna feed you."

"What?"

"You heard me. Dinner's on me."

"Why?"

"'Cause I wanna make sure you're safe. Is that all right?"

"Yeah, that's all right."

"Okay then," he said, looking into my eyes. "Come walk me to the door and lock it behind me."

I trailed after him, wrapped in a sheet. At the door he reached out, put a hand around the back of my neck, and leaned in to kiss me, parting my lips with his tongue. The kiss was very hot and left me breathless.

"What time?"

"What?" I had no idea what we were even talking about.

His smile was wicked and smug at the same time. "What time is work over?"

"Six."

"Good. I'll be there. Wait for me."

I nodded.

"And lock the goddamn door," he growled, walking out of it. "I don't want anybody in here with you."

After he left I stood there for a long time trying to figure out how I felt before I gave up and went to take a shower.

After much deliberation I decided that the one thing I knew for sure was that I was really looking forward to seeing him.

And that was a miracle in itself, since I couldn't remember the last time I cared at all.

* * * *

At eight that night, as I emerged from the elevator on the ground floor, I got a call.

"Jory."

"Yeah."

"Hey, it's Sam. I'm real sorry I didn't show up, but I got kind of roped into something."

"Sure."

"You didn't wait around, did you?"

"Nope. Six-fifteen, I was out of there."

"Oh. So you waited a whole fifteen minutes, huh?" He sounded irritable.

"Yep."

"Okay."

"Okay."

I hung up and stopped walking for a minute. When had I become one of these loser guys that equated great sex with anything more than a one-night stand? I knew better. When my phone rang again, I answered it as I crossed the street.

"Jory."

"I'm just leaving work now," I confessed because it didn't really matter if he thought I was a loser or not. We were done anyway. "I waited for you all this time. Just so ya know."

"Oh," Sam cleared his throat. "I'm glad."

"You're glad?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, whatever," I grunted. "Bye." I made sure I put it on vibrate before I walked toward the curb to get a cab home.

"Excuse me."

When I turned to the guy standing beside me, I realized he was studying my face. "Yeah?"

"Are you Jory Keyes?"

I yawned. "Yeah."

Big smile suddenly. "I'm Caleb Reid."

I groaned and turned to go.

"No—no, wait," he chuckled, grabbing my shoulder, holding on so I couldn't leave. "C'mon, I swear—even though your boss thinks I'm crazy, I'm not."

I squinted at him.

"Lemme feed you." His arm went over my shoulder, pulling me close.

I continued to stare.

"I just want to talk to you so maybe—just maybe—you can talk to him."

Heavy sigh as I agreed. I was just too curious to know what my boss was hiding to turn him down. And besides, I had nothing else to do.

* * * *

Caleb Reid looked like a farm boy even though he had grown up in the big city of Dallas, in the even bigger state of Texas. Between the warm trace of an accent and his big blue eyes, I was intrigued.

"You're wondering what in the world this has to do with your boss."

"Pretty much," I nodded, shoveling the French toast into my mouth.

"Well, see, it turns out that his folks are my folks."

I paused in mid-bite to stare at him. "I'm sorry?"

Quick sigh. "My mother is his mother. My father is his father."

"How is that even possible?"

"My mom, she got pregnant in high school and put him up for adoption. She never thought for a second that she'd end up meeting her high school sweetheart again years later and falling in love with him all over again."

"Wait. What?"

"Yeah." He laughed. "I mean, here are these two kids that both run like hell from their hometown and end up meeting a world away."

"You're going way too fast," I told him. "Pretend I'm drunk."

He laughed at me. "You're really funny."

I gave him a fake laugh. "Just back up."

So he explained it slowly for the impaired. Suzie Pomeroy and Danny Reid had been high school sweethearts. Halfway through their senior year she had gotten pregnant. She never told Daniel, she just disappeared. Her mother, Lynn Pomeroy, who did not believe in abortion, sent Suzie to live with her sister in Atlanta for the duration of the pregnancy. When the baby was born, he was put up for adoption. Suzie finished high school there and went on to college. Daniel went to college on a football scholarship. Both of

them wanted to save the world, and so both joined the Peace Corps. They met again in Somalia, digging ditches, doing relief work. Their chemistry was rekindled almost instantly, and they reunited as though they'd never parted.

I nodded after several minutes. "It's a good story."

"I know—it's totally a *Lifetime* original movie."

I smiled at him. He was funny too. "How does it end?"

"They moved back to their hometown to open a solar paneling company."

"Okay."

"They also put up windmills, and we raise our own food and... what?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"You look like you're ready to throw up."

"No."

He smiled at me. "So anyway... my mom." He took a deep breath. "Like, six months ago, she all of a sudden calls a family meeting and just brings out all these papers and lays the news on my dad and the rest of us that she gave up her son for adoption."

I stared at him.

"And my dad felt sorry for her until she told him the baby was his."

"Oh." I exhaled.

"Yeah. He took it really hard. And if you knew him, you'd get it. I mean his family... nothing's as important as us, ya know? He just... it almost killed him to think that his son was out in the world without him. He was just sick

thinking that maybe Dane had been hurt and there was no one there to protect him."

I nodded. "Well, they gotta know that wasn't the case. His parents... they adored him."

"Sure."

"He turned out all right. Everything turned out all right."

"Yeah, they know. Turns out my mom knew everything about Dane. It was an open adoption because that was the only way she would consent."

"So she should be okay."

"Yeah, but she's not and either is the old man. They gotta see him."

"So they should just come and see him."

"I know they should, but, Jory, but he won't even see me, let alone them."

"And you told him all this that you told me?"

"Yes."

"And what'd he say?"

"He thanked me for coming and told me that he wished me and my family well."

Ouch. "That sounds like him." I forced a smile. "He's just not a real sentimental guy."

"Yeah, but even if he's pissed at my mom... my dad didn't even know about him. He should want to at least see my dad."

"Again... you don't know Dane. He's just not real...." I searched for the best word, thinking. "Warm. He's private and he doesn't trust very many people

and to him this would be something that's done and over."

"That's not normal. Most people would want to meet them and talk."

"He's not most people."

"But that creates a problem for me."

I nodded. "'Cause your folks really wanna see him, huh?"

"Exactly. I mean they're eventually going to get sick of me stalling them and then they'll just hop on a plane and come confront him."

"That'd be bad."

"I know. If my reception is any indication of theirs... it would be very bad."

I sighed heavily. "So what's your plan?"

He leaned forward on the table. "You're my plan."

"I'm sorry?"

"Jory, I have spent the last two weeks watching Dane Harcourt, and I can say with certainty that, beyond a small circle of close friends, you are the only other person he allows access to his life."

"His girlfriend is—"

"I see him dating a lot of women but I did not see a girlfriend."

I shrugged.

"And like I said... he's got a super-tight circle, but trying to talk to the bank manager or the lawyer or the CEO... I mean, forget it. No one but you is gonna give me the time of day."

I stared into his pale blue eyes.

"But you... I see the way he looks at you and he cares about what you think."

"You're confused. He does exactly as he wants."

"I followed you guys down to the Miracle Mile last week."

"So?"

"All he did was follow you around."

"That's 'cause shopping's my deal, not his."

He gave me a look.

"What?"

"If you could see how he is with you... really see... I think you'd be surprised. It seems like he sort of relaxes when he's yelling at you."

I gave him the grunt of agreement. "Well, that I believe."

"It seems to me he's just himself."

But I knew what he was talking about. People mistook my ability to finish my boss's sentences as something more than it was. The fact that I picked up his dry cleaning, bought his vitamins, scheduled his medical checkups, knew exactly what to order him at any restaurant, and bought gifts for him to give that all he did was sign the card, was not indicative of a deeper relationship. I was his guy Friday. I was like a butler that didn't live in. Caleb was trying to make more of it than it really was.

"Jory, please—"

"Lookit," I began, leaning back in the booth. "I'll talk to him tomorrow, all right?"

Deep sigh as he smiled at me. "That'd be great."

"Listen, don't get all excited. He's not gonna care what—"

"He will," he nodded. "You'll see."

But I wasn't convinced.

After dinner, I was walking toward the curb to call a cab when Caleb called out to me.

"So you'll call me tomorrow?"

I smiled at him. "If I haven't been murdered, I will, but don't—"

"Jory!"

He was running toward me and I turned around to see what was there. I saw a man and I saw his fist and when he hit me it felt like my right eye exploded. I saw the other guy behind him and I saw the gun. I scrambled to my feet but I fell back down when everything swung left. Arm around my neck as I was pulled backwards. Caleb was standing with his hands up, asking the guy to please not hurt me. I saw spots and everything got really dim even as I realized I was being pulled into a car. Instantly I remembered everything my friend Tiffany had ever said in her self-defense classes. Never let anyone put you in a car. If you end up in a car, get out as quick as you can. So I fought—I bit and kicked and the hands all over me just couldn't quite find their grip.

"For crissakes, just fuckin' shoot him!"

"In the car? Shoot him in the car?"

"He's what, eighty pounds? Break his neck!"

"I'm trying, I just can't get—"

"Pull over." Another voice. "I'll get back there with him."

"Pull over where? We're in the middle of the goddamn expressway!"

"Fuck, he's bleeding all over me!"

I squirmed free and caught his head with my knee as the car pulled over. The door opened and I saw the gun. I kicked out as hard as I could and he moved just a little. And for the first time in my life I was glad to be small. Detective Kage's shoulders would have never cleared the space between the man and the car door. I threw myself out and hit the gravel hard. I heard the first gunshot and got my legs under me. It felt like I was running like I did in my dreams, like treading through caramel. I seemed like it took forever to get moving.

The second gunshot and my arm went numb before I was back down in the gravel. When I heard the car, I got back up and ran. It was either run down the side of the road or take a left and cut across the expressway. The chances of dying were about the same, and at least if I got hit by a car I wouldn't suffer. Being killed was one thing... I would pass on the whole torture scene. So I veered into oncoming traffic and ran, darting toward the median as it started to rain.

When my hands touched the cold concrete I turned to look over my shoulder. These were not thugs from a movie, they were not mindless flunkies, and so it was not surprising that they didn't come after me. They didn't shoot at me either; the three of them just whipped out their cell phones at the same time. I wasn't about to wait for the cars to thin out and have them come after me. I hopped the center divider and started running down the other side. As soon as I saw a break in the traffic I dashed across the expressway and fell down on the other side. I couldn't catch my breath so I decided to sit down for a minute. It ended up more of a fall. And it was weird, but the gravel had hurt before. This time the ground just felt solid and that was good, since I felt like I was lying in the middle of a roulette wheel. That was my last thought as the spinning got too fast and everything went black.

Chapter Eight

I started and jerked awake.

"Whoa-whoa-whoa," the voice said gently, hand on my chest. "Just settle down, you're all right. We've got you. Open your eyes—look at me."

I thought my eyes were open.

"Can you hear me, buddy?"

I let out a deep breath, and his voice was miles away before there was no sound at all.

* * * *

Bright light. I blinked so I could see something. Hospital. I was in the hospital and the IV bag, the bed, the beeping machines, and the white coats were a dead giveaway in case I missed the nurses.

"Crap," I groaned.

"Jory, can you hear me?" someone asked me.

"Yeah," I groaned, trying to sit up. "Shit."

"No-no-no," one of the doctors said gently, hand on my shoulder as she looked at me. "Just stay down until we get you all checked out here, all right?"

Heavy sigh. "Okay."

"Anyone I should call, Jory?"

I was having trouble focusing.

"He's got a business card for Dane Harcourt in here,"

another voice said.

"There's one for a Detective Kage as well."

"Wait," I gasped out. "Please don't call anybody. Please."

"Jory, can you—"

But I didn't hear the rest because the room did a sharp tilt to the left and I slid into darkness.

* * * *

I was freezing, and when I opened my eyes there was a curtain pulled around the bed, so even though I could hear a lot of noise, no one could see me. I was hooked up to an IV

bag, but I had seen enough movies to know that the needle came out just the same way it went in. It hurt more than I thought, but I pressed down and it only bled for a second. It took a few tries to sit up without being too dizzy and then to stand, but I was tenacious because I wanted out. At first the nausea was like a wave that sucked all the air out of my body, but it all calmed down, receded, and I was able to stand and breathe and then walk. I hated hospitals... all the smells, the freezing temperature, as well as the color of the walls and the fluorescent lighting... it was all just vile. I needed to get out fast.

It's easy to get out of a crowded, busy emergency room. I slipped out with everyone else coming in and out. I had my cell, my wallet, and my keys, so I was set. And as I started home I thought how the next time someone said my jeans were too tight I was going to bring up my night. The point was that if you were wrestling for your life in the back of a Lincoln town car it sure came in handy to have jeans that fit like a second skin. That way you made sure you didn't drop anything.

My phone startled me when it rang. I was still a little on edge. "Hello?"

"Where the fuck are you?"

"Who is this?" I asked even though I knew exactly who it was.

"You know damn well who the fuck this is!"

"Oh," I sighed. "Sam. Whaddya want?"

"What do I want? I want to know where the fuck you are!"

"I'm going home. I hate hospitals."

"Hospitals?"

"Yeah."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"I was in the hospital."

"When?"

"I dunno, like five minutes ago." I said as I took a left in front of the hospital and started down the street.

"What? How long were you there?"

"I have no idea. I was passed out."

"Passed out?"

"Yeah."

"Jory, what the hell happened?" he yelled at me.

"I dunno, I think one of those guys maybe hit me harder than I thought."

"Hit you?" His voice got even louder.

My head couldn't take the yelling. I hung up and stopped walking so I could figure out where I was. When I saw the stairs that led up to the track for the subway, I started up. I answered my phone on the fifth ring.

"What?" I whined. My head hurt.

"Where are you?" Very controlled voice, but I could hear him talking through clenched teeth.

"On my way home."

"What hospital were you at?"

"I have no idea. Leave me alone, okay," I muttered as I hung up on him.

As I sat on the subway I had a vision of him sitting outside of my place in his monster car, waiting there so he could yell at me. That idea kept me in my seat five stops beyond where I was supposed to get off. As I sat on the steps trying not to freeze, I realized that my exodus from the hospital had been poorly planned. I wasn't sure who to call since it was three in the morning. When my phone rang I answered because it was a distraction I needed.

"Jory?"

"Oh hey, Ben." I sighed because this was not who I needed.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the gym," I lied because it was easy.

"Oh, well, I just wanted to make sure we were okay from the other night."

"Course."

"Yeah? You're not freaked out?"

"No, flattered is what I was."

"Okay good."

"But I gotta let you go, okay? I'll call ya."

"You do that."

I hung up and immediately my phone rang again.

"Yeah?"

"Jory, goddamn it, where the hell are you?"

I groaned. "I'd rather die of hypothermia than tell you."

"Very dramatic. Answer the goddamn question."

I grunted.

"You were at County, you idiot," he snarled into the phone.

"They told me you have a mild concussion and you're all beat up and—"

"I'm fine." I shivered hard, my teeth chattering. "I just don't wanna go home unless you promise you won't be there."

"I am here."

I sighed deeply. "I knew it."

"You're not coming home on purpose?"

"Yep."

"Jory, you do understand that you were kidnapped and assaulted and...."

"Yeah, I know."

"You know? That's all you have to say?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Jesus, you're an idiot! Jory, they are not going to stop trying to kill you!"

I sighed heavily. "I gotta go to work. What time is it?"

"Work? Are you fuckin' kidding me? Jory, your ass is going into protective custody today!"

"Yeah, no." I yawned, shivering again, my teeth making the clicking noise that I was powerless to stop. "I've got a lot of shit to do and I need to talk to my boss about something important because I think he's making a big—"

"Jory! Where are you?"

"Why'dya blow me off? Were you on a date?"

There was a beat of silence. "What the fuck are you talking about?" he asked me, his voice quiet but filled with force at the same time.

"You were, weren't you? Your buddies or whatever... you had to go on some date with some woman and so you couldn't come see me."

"This is what this is about? A date?"

"Go to hell."

"Are you on drugs? Did they shoot you full of shit at the hospital?"

"You know what, I don't even care. Just leave me alone," I said and hung up on him again.

When it rang again, I saw that the number was different.

"Hello?"

"Jory baby, where are you?"

"Hey, Nick." I sighed deeply. For whatever reason, his voice was soothing.

"I saw your name on the board when I came in but, honey, where are you?"

"I left."

"Obviously. Do you know you can't just take out an IV and walk out of a hospital?"

"Oh no?"

"Jory, baby, you're—"

"I'm fine."

"Jory, you're hurt worse than you think, honey. You can't be alone right now. Tell me where you are? Are you home?"

No, I wasn't home, I thought, and wanted to yell it at him.

Because for whatever reason, as it always did, his voice had gone from sounding sultry and sexy to whiny and needy in a heartbeat. And it wasn't Nick, I knew it wasn't Nick... it was me. I just didn't respond well to begging or pleading or anything that sounded weak or clinging. I responded to power and dominance and demands for my time and my body. The gentle, sensitive guy did nothing for me. I was a mess but realizing it did nothing to prevent it.

"Jory... honey... can I come pick you up?"

"No," I said as I started shaking. I was so cold. "I'm gonna call somebody Nicky, don't worry."

"But I do worry. You have a concussion and a bullet grazed your shoulder and I have to...."

"But I'm all right."

"Honey, I'm afraid you're gonna pass out and—"

"I'll be okay," I assured him. "I'll call ya later."

"No-no-no—Jory, baby, just tell me where you are, I'll pick you up and you can come home with me and—"

"How 'bout I call you tomorrow?"

"Jory, whatever you're mixed up in, I can handle it. Please, baby, let me take care of you."

"Nick, I—"

"Jory," he sighed deeply. "I am crazy about you. I think about you all the time."

"You do?"

"Yes, God yes. I just, you need to give me some of your time. I know I'm not as exciting as whatever else is going on in your life, but Jory, I'm good for you. I want to be with you."

It was hard to breathe suddenly, partly because I was turning into a Popsicle and the rest because brutal honesty wasn't usually my gig. I favored the disappearing act in most cases. "You know, Nick," I began quickly because it was better to do it like pulling off a Band-Aid, just really fast.

"We've got no chemistry at all. You know we don't."

"Is that right?"

"You know it is." I winced; this was just as painful to say, as it was to hear.

"Well, I think you need to give me another chance to impress you. Because if we're being honest, being in bed with you was amazing."

"Thanks."

"I'm not flattering you, it's a fact. I didn't want it to end."

"That's nice."

"Nice? Jesus." He laughed dryly.

I chuckled because he sounded so deflated.

"Listen, Jory, I'm starting my life, ya know? I'm an attending now at the hospital, I bought my first place, and I'm ready for the guy, the one guy that's gonna be my partner and build my future with me. I don't mean to scare you, but when I met you I had a feeling that you were the guy."

The man had definitely confused so-so sex with love.

"Jory?"

"Nicky, you think maybe you just needed to get laid?"

"You know I'm gonna forgive you for being a total prick since you're in shock right now and probably getting frostbite."

"Sorry," I breathed out. "That was a shitty thing to say."

"Yes, it was."

"Nick, I—"

"No just shut up and listen. Do you know you never listen?"

It was true, I didn't.

"Jory, I can get laid any night of the week. What I want is to be in bed with someone that I can see a future with and not just a one-night stand. I'm not some trick J... I wanna be your guy."

"Why do you even care? Why not just call it a day with me?"

"No. We're not gonna do that."

"Why?"

"Because I am crazy about you, I told you already."

"But why?"

He chuckled. "You're fishing."

"I'm confused," I assured him.

"Jory, you're funny and smart and those big dark eyes of yours are... and you told me my sunglasses were ugly."

"They were ugly."

His exhale of breath was long. "Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are?"

"Nick—"

"It's your lips, they drive me nuts," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "I never wanted to stop kissing you."

He was just the nicest guy that did nothing for me.

"I really...." His voice was hoarse. "Hey, do me a favor.

Look up at the street sign where you are and read it to me.

I'm heading for my car."

"No, I'll call ya tomorrow, I swear."

"Jory, you need to sleep and you need somebody to take care of you. I want to be that somebody. Besides, who's better than a doctor?"

I smiled into the phone and promised to call the next day after work. I hung up with him begging me to tell him where I was. The phone rang, and I realized I had missed eleven calls while I was talking to Nick.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?"

"Sam, I—"

"So help me God, if you don't tell me where you are right this second I will shoot you myself as soon as I find your scrawny ass."

I chuckled. "I thought you liked my ass."

No answer.

"Is that not right, Detective?"

"You cocky piece of shit. You're gonna throw that up in my face now?"

"Actually, I'm not gonna do anything at all to you or with you or... shit...." I was really tired suddenly. The very last of my adrenaline was gone. I wanted somebody to take care of me. "Just have the other officer call me, all right. I don't wanna see you anymore. I gotta go. I gotta call somebody to...."

"Don't you dare hang up on me again or I will... I... oh, look at that," he said at the same time I heard the sharp squeal of brakes.

My head came up and I saw him double-parked on the street. He slammed his door and was coming around the front of his SUV. I didn't even try to stand. I leaned my head against the pole instead. Everything hurt and I was cold down inside my bones.

"Jory, I'm gonna—"

"God," I groaned. "What do you want?"

When he didn't say anything, I looked up into his face. His jaw was clenched and his dark eyes were locked on mine.

"I think I...." There was a ringing in my ears and I felt like someone had shoved an ice pick into my skull between my eyes. "Oh shit."

His hands moved to my face as I rode out the pain. When it receded, I stared into his eyes as he knelt down in front of me.

"Jory, your lips are blue," he groaned before a quick exhale. "Christ. Can you walk?"

I shook my head.

He crushed me in his arms and the warmth was instant and amazing. "I'm taking you home with me, so wrap your brain around it."

"Okay."

When he stood up, my head hit his shoulder and he rubbed his chin in my hair. My feet left the ground and as everything spun I was lifted into the seat. In the SUV he stroked my hair as I closed my eyes. He had the heater up on high and all I heard was the sound of the blower. I didn't remember the rest of the drive.

* * * *

I was warm and every single part of me felt heavy. I rolled over and realized that I was under a sheet and several blankets in a huge bed.

"You awake?"

I looked up and Sam stepped away from the window where he was standing. "Kind of."

He took a breath. "Good."

"Thanks."

"You want something?"

I shook my head.

"So this is my place, obviously. I live here alone so—"

"What am I doing here?"

"You passed out in my car. I had to do something."

"Why didn't you take me back to the hospital?"

His jaw clenched. "'Cause you just have a concussion. I know all about those."

I smiled at him before I looked around the room. "Is it okay if I take a shower?"

"Sure," he said, walking over to the bed. "You need help getting up?"

"No," I answered but didn't move.

He nodded, staring down at me.

I arched an eyebrow.

"Okay, well, it's right through there." He pointed to the right. "I'll bring you some sweats, okay?"

"Sure. Thanks."

When he left I threw back the covers and got up in pieces.

First sitting up, then my legs over the side of the bed, moving next to my bare feet on the floor. I was so glad I wasn't dizzy. I didn't want to do a face-plant onto his Navajo-patterned throw rug and even more... I didn't want to need him.

I stood in the shower under the hot water until it ran cold.

When I got out I went through his medicine cabinet and found only the essentials. There was none of my cocoa butter lotion, my hair products, my moisturizer, or my lip balm. I was completely addicted to lip balm and applied it all day every day. There was a gentle knock on the door after a few minutes. I hadn't heard the first few times he'd tapped since I was busy scrutinizing my black eye and the bruises on my throat.

"Yeah?"

"I put the sweats out here on the bed."

"Thank you."

"Are you all right?"

"Yep."

"Okay."

I waited a few minutes to let him leave the room before I went out. I didn't want to talk to him I just wanted to rest.

The sweats were neatly folded on the bed, and when I put them on I had to roll the bottoms like six times, pull the drawstring really tight, and roll the top over before they would even stay on my hips. I would definitely not be borrowing any more of Sam Kage's clothes. I climbed back into his bed and lay down. I was exhausted just with the effort a shower took.

"Hey," he said, walking into the bedroom. "You feel better?"

I bunched one of his pillows up behind my head, getting comfortable. It was raining outside, really hard from what I could hear, and I knew it was cold. But I was warm and cozy in bed.

"You look very content."

"Cause I am." I smiled, looking around the room, letting out a deep sigh.

"Ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Who's Nick Sullivan?"

"Doctor I date."

"Oh, okay."

"He's very nice."

"Oh yeah? Very nice?"

I grunted because I wasn't really listening.

"Very nice is the kiss of death," he chuckled, and I felt the bed dip as he took a seat beside me. "Right?"

"Pretty much."

"He's into you, huh?"

I glanced up at him, gave him a half grin.

"He must be because he's called like a dozen times. I turned your phone off 'cause I got sick of hearing it."

"He likes my scrawny ass," I teased him, smiling.

"I like it too."

I opened my eyes as he ran the back of his fingers up my throat.

"At least you're not freezing anymore."

The noise I made was halfway between a moan and sigh. I was glad I was under so many blankets so he couldn't tell I was excited.

"You sound like you're purring."

I smiled and his hand went around my throat.

"I wanted to strangle you when I called and you told me you were in the hospital... I mean Jesus, Jory, you were almost killed tonight."

I closed my eyes again, rolling over away from his touch.

"Can you get me some water?"

"Yeah," he said gruffly and left.

I wasn't awake when he came back.

Chapter Nine

When I opened my eyes it was still raining, but it wasn't dark like night but dark like morning. It was very early on a gray, rainy day. The kind of day best spent under the covers watching TV.

"I called your boss and told him you weren't coming in, so don't freak out."

I looked up at his face as he sipped coffee from a plain black mug.

"Can I have some of that?" I asked, squinting at him.

I heard his long exhale. "Sure. How do you take it?"

"Just cream, no sugar. It needs to be blonde like me."

"Okay," he said gently, the corner of his lip curling. "Be right back."

But before he could get far I stopped him with my voice.

"Last night you were worried about me, huh? That's how you get when you're scared maybe... you yell," I said softly, beginning to understand the inner workings of Detective Kage. "'Cause you were terrified that I was hurt, weren't you?"

He just stared down at me.

"Tell me."

"You scared the shit outta me."

"Were you worried about me or your case?"

"You."

"How come?"

The furrowed brows, the way his eyes looked... I felt my stomach twist into a knot.

"I don't know because mostly I just wanna kill you."

I smiled up at him. "What'd my boss say?"

"He said you need to call him by ten."

"Okay."

"What's the deal with him? He doesn't treat you like a boss would."

"No," I agreed. "I get treated like we're family."

He stared at me, his gaze never wavering. It made me uneasy.

"Do I look that bad?"

He shook his head.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. You look like somebody roughed you up."

I smiled lazily, my eyes narrowing as I looked up at him.

"You wanna rough me up?"

The muscle in his jaw jerked tight and he swallowed hard, his eyes on my mouth. "Yes."

My heart was in my throat. His eyes were so dark, so intense, just locked on mine. "Come kiss me then."

He slowly, gently, like he was concentrating very hard, put the mug down. His hands were on my face as he leaned in for the kiss. I lifted my chin to meet him and felt the tips of his fingers slide over my jaw.

"Jory," he breathed against my mouth, his lips hovering over mine.

I tried so hard not to make a sound but the whimper came up out of me and I instantly felt the change as a surge of desire rolled through him. Tender was replaced with the thrust of his tongue between my parted lips. He ground his mouth down over mine, kissing me hard and deep. I arched up against him and his hands were hot on my skin.

"I don't wanna hurt you," he rasped, panting, his mouth devouring my lips, sucking and licking, his tongue tangled with mine.

"You won't."

"I want you so bad."

"Good."

He got up and grabbed my thighs, yanking me to the edge of the bed. He had the sweats off me in seconds, reaching into the top drawer of his nightstand at the same time he pulled up my knees. I saw the tube and couldn't contain my laughter. He froze, staring down at me.

"What?"

"You got lube?" I raised my eyebrows. "For me?"

He looked pained, and it was both endearing and adorable at the same time.

"You're a mess," I assured him gently, motioning him close.

He wrapped me in his arms and deepened the kiss, shifting to bear down on me, his mouth slanting over mine, so possessively, so urgently that I whimpered some more.

"Jesus," he groaned, his mouth on my throat, kissing me.

"I wanna fuckin' eat you."

It was a confession from his soul since his brain was turned off, so I put my hands on his face and kissed him back, sucking, biting, and making sure my tongue missed no part of his mouth. I gave as good as I got and felt the deep shiver that came with his surrender.

I trembled in his arms and he made a noise like he was dying.

"Shit, something's wrong with me."

"No," I soothed him, kissing his eyes, his cheeks, his brows, and the bridge of his nose.

"I'm all twisted up," he grumbled under his breath "I fuckin' hate this."

"It's okay," I told him, smiling slowly. "I'll take care of you."

He eased back and looked down into my eyes. "You can't even take care of yourself."

I felt like I could fly. "But I could make your life so nice."

"The hell you can," he almost shouted at me, rough as he rolled me onto my stomach, his hand in my hair, knee between my legs to spread them.

I arched my back like a cat, up into him, and his mouth grazed my skin. The strangled sound that came out of him made me smile.

"Jory."

I slid out of his grip and rolled over on my back, lifting my knees, holding out my arms for him. "You're fighting so hard,"

I sighed. "Just stop, just breathe."

He took a shuddering breath before he gathered me close, holding me tight, pressing me along the length of him. His hands slid down my body and when his mouth followed, I begged him. The change in him in one day was staggering, the understanding of what I wanted and his confidence in what

he could do... I didn't need to offer any more instruction. The mechanics no longer a mystery, his hands, his mouth, moved expertly over my skin as he chanted my name.

* * * *

The rain woke me with its steady drum on the window. I smiled as warm hands moved down my rib cage then over my stomach, kneading, caressing, gentle and arousing at the same time.

"Don't you hafta go to work?" I teased him, surprised at myself for all the sleeping I was doing. Sex had never worn me out before.

"I can't leave you alone." His voice was husky, slicing right through me, causing the shiver.

Stretching languidly, I rolled over onto the sculpted chest, my head on his heart.

"Fuck."

I lifted my head to look up into his eyes.

"What?" he asked gruffly.

"I dunno," I stared into his eyes. "You're the one swearing,"

He put his hand in my hair and massaged my scalp, easing my head back down on his chest.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothin's wrong. That's the goddamn problem."

And that made no sense but I let it go, enjoying his hands on me too much to question him.

"Shit."

I slid my leg between his and he lifted my chin with a gentle hand. His mouth was on mine and I was rolled onto my back and kissed tenderly, slowly, taking his time, this time, to taste me. He worked his way down my throat to my chest, my nipples suckled each in turn before the hot, wet mouth slid over my flat stomach to my cock. He took me in slowly, drawing out and then back, his tongue swirling over my skin before he took me in deeper, licking me with long strokes of his tongue, sucking hard, his hands digging into my thighs and calves. I hoped he would leave bruises because I craved his mark on me. When I felt the clenching inside, the tingling, I told him to stop. I felt like my heart was going to burst. His eyes never left mine and I cried his name as I shuddered in his hands and he swallowed all I had. Afterward he rose and pinned me to the bed under him.

"I love the noises you make when you're happy."

I only grunted because my brain wasn't working yet, my body boneless and liquid under his... ready to melt into him.

"Your eyes get so dark and when you say my name... I have never wanted anyone like I want you, Jory. I don't even think people are supposed to feel like this. I think—"

"Shhh," I said pushing against him so I could roll him over on his back.

"No," he said, his voice cracking, filled with emotion, arms wrapping around me, stilling my movement. "I don't want you to, I don't need ... just lie here with me."

I was quiet, reveling in the difference between the boys I had slept with and the man who now held me in his arms. All my other lovers expected a quick return for any gift given, but Sam's desire ran to pleasuring me simply because it made him happy to do so.

"Sam, I—"

"Listen, I don't want you seeing the doctor and you're sure as hell not going out of town with him."

"How'd you know I—"

"I listened to your messages."

"Oh." I shifted onto my side and he immediately spooned around me, his thighs against my ass. I didn't want him to see me smile. "He bought me a plane ticket."

"I don't care if he bought you a fuckin' pony," he assured me, the annoyance clear in his voice. "You go nowhere with him."

"Yes sir, Detective."

"I already went and packed up all your clothes so—"

"What?" I tried to move, to turn so I could see his face, but he wasn't having it. He was so much stronger than me that if he wanted me down, I was down. If he wanted me immobile in his arms, that's what I would be doing. "You packed what?"

"You heard me," he said gruffly, almost growling. "I got every stitch of clothing you own. It's all in my guest bedroom."

I put your laptop in the living room and I grabbed your iPod and some of your books. You don't have much stuff."

"No."

"I got your comforter too 'cause I figured you liked it."

"I do like it but—"

"You can't stay in your apartment... I mean, I went there without a key and got your stuff. Think about it."

"Yeah but—"

"I want you to be safe," he said as his mouth closed on my shoulder. The man could not keep his hands or his mouth off me.

"I'm not five, Sam."

"No, but... you need looking after."

"But what are you going to—"

"For now you're here 'cause I gotta watch you. That's all anybody needs to know."

"Okay." I was thinking. "So as soon as the case is over I'll pack my stuff and..."

"Listen to me," he said slowly, kissing the back of my neck. "Let's just worry about things as they come."

"Easy for you to say... I've got rent to pay and—"

"No," he cut me off. "I talked to your landlord, and until he replaces the door and puts decent dead bolts in that place he gets nothing. I told him he was lucky that you never asked him to do shit around that place."

"Great," I muttered. "Now he's gonna hate me."

"I'm surprised no one else ever said anything about your locks."

"Well, Nick did say that—"

He bit my shoulder before he sucked it hard. "I don't wanna hear about the doctor."

I chuckled. "Okay."

"And your dancing days are over."

I smiled wide but he couldn't see it.

"Do I hafta mention the doctor again?"

I cleared my throat. "It's not fair if you date and I—"

"I won't."

"Uh-huh." I nodded. "So where were you last night, Detective, when you were supposed to be picking me up for dinner?"

Deep sigh as he clutched me tight, stroking my hip, nuzzling his face into my hair. "On a double date."

"I knew it."

"It was planned weeks ago. No way to get out of it but when I'm with you my brain short-circuits so I completely forgot until my buddy reminded me."

"Okay, so that's what I'm saying. You're single and straight, so all your friends are gonna...."

"I'll take care of it." He rubbed a stubbled cheek against the bare skin of my shoulder. It sent a shiver right through me.

"If you screw some girl while I'm—"

"Then fair's fair," he said, his voice husky, so sexy. "You can sleep with a girl too, baby."

"I love women," I assured him. "I just don't *love* women, ya know?"

He chuckled before rising over me, propping himself up on his elbow to look down into my face. "Do people tell you all the time how beautiful you are?"

"No."

"You're lying." He smiled evilly, his eyes sparkling. "Look at you, you're gorgeous."

He thought I was beautiful, it was all I heard. I felt the heat race across my skin as he ran his thumb over my bottom lip, leaning into me.

I moaned, almost whimpering, and his mouth touched mine. I felt his hand slide down over my hip as his tongue slid between my barely parted lips. It was too much for me. I closed my eyes for just a minute.

"Jory Keyes," he said softly, his fingertips smoothing over my eyebrows. "What if I missed you?"

My body was back to being heavy and I felt myself sinking down into the bed, the warm mass of muscle and bone engulfing me.

"Go to sleep, baby," he soothed me, his lips on my eyelids.

"I'm here."

It was the last thing I heard.

Chapter Ten

Sam had left me an hour later with orders to stay inside his apartment and not to leave for any reason. I wasn't even awake enough to argue. I was back asleep in seconds with him rubbing circles on my back. When my phone rang I was surprised because I thought I was calling Dane, not the other way around.

"You're in trouble," he said flatly. "I talked to Detective Kage and he said you're in protective custody. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what's going on with you right now."

So even though I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say, I spilled it all. "I don't wanna put any of you guys in danger by coming in."

"We have a security guard in our building that checks everyone in and out, Jory. I'll expect you back here Monday morning."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. When have you ever known me to say something I didn't mean?"

Never.

"Okay then. I'll see ya Monday."

"Actually, I'm having dinner at Adagio's tonight at six-thirty," he said crisply. "Come by briefly so I can look at you, all right?"

"What's with the early dinner?"

"Theater tickets, if you must know," he said curtly.

"Oh."

"I'll expect you."

He just wanted to see me with his own eyes and make sure I was in one piece.

"Okay. Thanks, boss."

He hung up and I rolled over and went back to sleep.

I was woken up from my second nap of the day with a call from Caleb Reid. He told me that he was the one that had called the police, after watching me get stuffed into the car the night before. He'd gone in and filed a report at the police station and then been visited by Detective Kage an hour ago.

"You know, I've never talked to a detective before, but it was kinda intense."

I chuckled. "I have no doubt."

"Are you okay?"

And I was, so I told him so before thanking him for calling the police.. He asked me what I was mixed up in but I returned the subject to Dane. Immediately he wanted to know if I was well enough to talk to him. I told him I would try when I saw my boss later. When he hung up I got out of bed and made coffee before looking for something to have for breakfast. There was only a box of kids' cereal, and I wondered how a grown man had Lucky Charms in his cabinet.

When I heard the keys rattling in the lock I was expecting Sam, but found a stunning, red-haired older woman instead.

When she looked up from her grocery bags I was speechless, as I recognized her instantly.

"Ohmygod you're Regina Rappaport," I breathed out, standing there, staring, openmouthed.

Her smile was breathtaking. "Yes, I am. And you watch way too many old movies."

"Holy shit." I smiled wide. "You're even more beautiful in person."

"So charming," she chuckled, putting down the grocery bags and holding out her arms. "Come here."

I dashed over to give her a hug and she patted my back and stroked my hair. She smelled faintly like vanilla with a trace of rain. I was surprised at how tight she held me.

When she pushed out to arm's length, she smiled warmly.

"Who are you?"

"Jory Keyes. Sam's watching me for a little while. I'm his witness."

"Mmmm-hmmm." She eyed me, looking me over as I stood there in a T-shirt, sweats, and a pair of Sam's fuzzy white sweat socks. "Well, my darling, every week I bring groceries for my two unmarried sons to make sure they don't starve. My son Michael, the architect, eats a little better than my son Samuel, the policeman, but not by much. For instance, the last time I was here there was only a fossilized stick of butter, a box of Lucky Charms, and very old milk. I will not be surprised if he's eaten everything I brought and only those three items again remain."

I smiled and nodded.

"Help me with these."

So I grabbed four bags of groceries and helped her carry them to the kitchen. She didn't want any help unpacking so I sat on one of the barstools and watched her.

"Jory, sweetheart, are you hungry?" she asked absently, still putting things away.

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned and looked at me and her eyes sparkled.

"Really?"

I nodded and she patted my hand before she pulled down a frying pan from those hanging above her head on hooks.

She was dying to take care of me and I was more than willing to let her.

"How about an omelet?"

"That'd be great."

She stayed for three hours and in that time she told me all about Hollywood in the seventies, how being beautiful wasn't as much help as having talent, and how she'd met and fallen in love with a fireman from Chicago. He'd swept her off her feet to motherhood and suburbia and there she'd discovered what she loved more than being in front of a camera. Being a mother. I listened and ate and told her how I'd been raised by my grandmother and how I'd come to Chicago and where I worked. She'd heard of Dane Harcourt, was very impressed, and I told her all about Brian Minor and my friend Anna and how I had met her son.

"You know Jory, you are just beautiful."

"Thank you."

"I bet people tell you all the time that you're simply luminous."

I knew I wasn't ugly but luminous was an exaggeration.

Still, it was nice to hear.

"Why don't you change and I'll take you to Delvecchio's for some pie?"

I nodded, smiling, and she caught her breath.

"You really are stunning, Mr. Keyes."

"Right backatcha."

Her laughter was deep and throaty as she told me to hurry up.

When I emerged in my tight jeans, crisp white shirt under my v-neck cashmere pullover, she smiled wide. I was glad Sam had brought everything from my bathroom as well as all my clothes. I smelled like me again and I would have died without all my hair products.

"People are going to think I'm a cougar with my boy toy."

I froze where I was and she burst into laughter.

"What?"

"I just didn't think you'd know what a cougar was!"

"Because I've been what, living under a rock all these years? Hello, honey, I have daughters."

I smiled at her and she took my arm and led me out of the apartment. As the door closed she passed me her key for Sam's apartment.

"You keep this set, doll, I have another at home."

I pocketed them and followed her down the stairs and out to her car, which was parked in front of the eight-floor apartment building. I liked her silver Lexus infinitely more than Sam's SUV and told her so.

"I know," she agreed. "It's a tank, not a car."

The bakery was small and intimate, warm inside with little red-and-white-checkered curtains and the same type of window valances. There was a bell on the front door when you walked in and the whole place smelled like freshly baked cookies. I loved it and made a mental note to pick up baklava for Dane the next time I came. It was his favorite.

She had a slice of lemon meringue and I had pumpkin custard. We talked about her family, about her daughters, her son Michael, and about how much trouble she was having finding a girl for Sam. Once I recovered from almost choking to death on my milk, I told her not to worry about him. When the right person came along, he'd know. She prayed I was right.

When she dropped me off back at his apartment after two hours of food shopping, she told me to be sure I came for Sunday dinner. She'd expect me at six with Sam. She invited him every week but he never went—always too busy. She was counting on me to get him there. I promised her I wouldn't let her down. Her hand stayed on my cheek for several minutes before I got out of the car with all my bags and she drove away. It had been a very nice day.

* * * *

Every Friday night my boss had dinner out. He always took at least eight people with him as well as his current date. This week, as he'd told me, it was Adagio's, a very good Italian restaurant, and the flavor of the week was a cardiologist named Kensie Beckman. When I was shown to his table, she did not seem pleased to see me. At least she was still polite.

The others—his friends the doctors and the lawyers—did not seem annoyed at all to find me there among them.

"Hi-hi," I greeted everyone, letting out a deep sigh as I turned to look at my boss. "Could I talk to you for one minute please?"

"Did you eat?"

"No, not yet," I stammered. "But listen, could I please just—"

"Sit down and eat," he ordered me. "You look pasty."

There was a pause as he looked at me like he had thought of something.
"Should you even be out of the hospital?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"So Monday morning you'll be back at work?"

"I said I would."

He shot me a look.

"Sorry. I'll be in."

"Good. Nothing gets done when you're not there. That girl... what's her name?"

"Who?"

"The receptionist."

"You know her name." I scowled at him.

"Do I?"

"It's Piper."

He snapped his fingers. "Piper. That's right."

"Quit?"

He smiled evilly. "Anyway, she puts everyone through to me. It's a nightmare."

"I will be there on Monday."

"Thank God."

I smiled at him.

"Sit down and eat," he ordered me, standing up to motion for the waiter.

"No, I just need to—"

"He's not going to let it go, Jory," Jude Coughlin said to me, a huge smile on his face as he took the chair the waiter brought for me and put it down on the other side of Dane.

"Just sit."

I sat down and Dane turned to look at me, concerned, his dark gray eyes so warm. I hated putting him in a bad mood when he was in a good one.

"What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"No. What do you want to eat?"

"Eat?"

"Yes, eat."

"I don't want to eat."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't," I insisted, looking nervously around the table. They were all looking at us.

"Never mind." He shook his head suddenly, turned and gestured for the waiter. "I know what to get you."

I shed my peacoat and settled myself into the chair. When I looked up I found all eyes still on me. "Hey, sorry about this, everybody."

"No, sweetie, it's fine," Marilyn Castro told me, reaching out to pat my arm.
"You're always welcome. You're more his little brother than anything else."

I wondered if that was true even as Jude nodded his agreement.

"So talk to me about the cop."

I looked back at Dane. "What about him?"

His eyes narrowed. "You're doing what with him?"

"How is that your business?"

"You're my business."

I scowled at him. "I have to testify."

"And so you're staying with him until then?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"I see. So then you can work?"

"I already said yes."

He nodded. "And if you can't? Will you quit?"

It was asked very casually, but I could tell from his eyes that my answer was important.

"Do you want me to quit?"

"Maybe the detective will want you to."

"That's not what I asked you."

"Do you want to?"

"Do you want me to?" I repeated, leaning toward him just a little.

"You're being evasive."

"You're being three."

"Do you want to?" he asked me again, pressing for the answer.

"I refuse to answer before you."

He smiled slowly, his eyes firing. I was amusing him so much at that moment. I had to grin back; there was no way not to respond when he was teasing me. "No," he answered quietly, his voice low. "I don't want you to quit."

"Then I won't." I smiled smugly, very pleased, straightening up in my seat.

He leaned back away from me and started up a conversation with Kensie and another woman at the table. I sat there chatting with Rebecca Stoler and Marilyn. They were all so very nice, even if none of them could seem to do anything else but watch and listen when Dane and I talked.

The food came and I waited while Dane moved things back and forth between our plates. Onions off both our plates, mushrooms on mine, cucumbers on his, carrots on mine, potatoes on his, and he split his steak and my chicken so we both had a little of each.

"Wow." Marilyn smiled at me. "That was quite the production."

"Well," I shrugged. "I mean, we eat together every day."

He knows what I'll eat."

"I know what he'll eat," he echoed me, and then looked at my plate. "And that looks okay."

I still didn't have much of an appetite but I picked at the chicken.

"You look better than I thought you would," Dane said, looking into my eyes, hand on my chin turning my head back and forth. "The shiner's a nice touch, though."

"Thanks," I said, pushing the plate away from me, draining my ice tea.

"The new typist is a hundred and twenty years old," he muttered.

I smiled wide. "Well, that makes sense."

"I guess," he said, arm around the back of my chair. "Are you safe at the detective's place?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"All right."

After a while I tapped his shoulder gently.

"What?"

"Can I talk to you a second?"

"About?"

"Caleb Reid."

"What about him?" he asked casually, but I could tell from the look in the dark eyes that I was in trouble.

"I think you should do what he wants and go see her."

"I think you chose this setting to speak to me about his because you knew I couldn't kill you in public," he said pointedly.

"I think you're right."

He smiled and turned so he was facing me. "And when did you become informed of the specifics of this situation?"

"Last night. I had dinner with him."

"And you spoke to him after you said you wouldn't?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it was about you and you know I just had to know."

"Okay."

"So I'll go with you."

"Go where?" Kensie asked from the other side of him.

"Oh you will, will you?" he asked me, completely ignoring her.

"You know I will."

"It's far from here."

"I know, Texas. I can go there."

"And Detective Kage would think what about that?"

"He wouldn't care."

"No?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"He knows you're my boss. He knows I'd be safe with you."

"Does he?"

I looked at him hard. "Yeah. Course."

"All right," he decided. "I'll go next Friday."

"You mean we."

"I mean I."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it's no one's business but mine."

"I thought I would go with you." I said quickly, trying to not let him hear the disappointment.

He smiled as he surveyed the restaurant. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"There's no reason for it."

"No?"

"No," he said flatly, turning to look at me.

"You don't need me to go?" I asked hopefully.

"No," he said sternly, trying to force me with his tone to quit.

"You're sure?"

"Very sure. Now drop it."

I sighed heavily. "I'll call Mr. Reid."

"I will call Mr. Reid. You're done with it."

I was about to savor my negotiation skills when I suddenly turned and looked at him. The grin was obvious and his eyes were twinkling. "You played me. You were already going to go."

"I was mulling it over."

"But?"

"But now, when it's a horror, I have you to blame." He grinned evilly.

Crap.

"So where are you off to?" Kensie asked, her hand on his chin, turning his eyes to her.

I excused myself another ten minutes later and stood up to leave.

"Where're you going?" Dane asked, rising from his chair to stand in front of me.

"Home." I yawned, smiling up at him. "I've interrupted enough for one night."

His hand squeezed my shoulder gently. "You haven't done anything."

I held his gaze.

"Come on," he said gruffly, hand on the back of my neck, leading me from the table.

"Good night!" I called back over my shoulder.

Dane walked me out to wait for the cab.

"Do you want to come along to the theater? I can get you a ticket."

"No thanks," I said as I buttoned up my coat. "I don't wanna die."

"What are you talking about now?"

"Your date'll kill me. She's already royally pissed off."

"She's not."

"Oh trust me, she is."

"I care." He sighed heavily, breathing in the crisp air.

I looked up at him a minute, studying the classic profile.

"Why are you out with her then?"

He gave me a look like I was clearly out of my mind.

"When I'm ready to discuss my personal life with you I'll let you know." He opened the door of the cab that had been hailed by the valet and I climbed in.

"I can't wait!" I said cheerfully, smiling widely as he closed the door. I waved hard as the cab pulled away from the curb just to try and annoy him a little.

* * * *

I made it back to the apartment about ten minutes before Sam, and had his stereo blasting when he walked in the door.

"Hey!" he called out to me as he came into the living room. "What are you doing?"

It was perfectly obvious that I was dancing. On his hardwood floors in my socks, I was sliding around pretty well.

He stood and watched me, his smile wide. I sang along at the top of my lungs and he motioned me to him after a few minutes. I slid across the floor to him and he grabbed the front of my sweater and pulled me close.

"I'll shower and we can go get something to eat, all right?"

More food. "Sure."

He put his hands on my face. "You look better today."

"Yeah?" I asked, stepping closer to him, leaning my cheek in his hand.

"Somebody needs a little attention."

I lifted my chin, stretching my neck toward him. His hands were instantly on my throat.

"Huh, J? You need somethin'?"

I nodded and he eased me close and kissed me. Funny that in the span of four days the man was kissing me like he owned me. He was very possessive, whether he knew it or not.

"Keep dancing, J," he teased me, pulling back, kissing the end of my nose. "I'll be right out."

I rolled my eyes, turning off the music as he jogged out of the room.

There was knocking at the front door, so I went to see who it was. The man on the other side of the door looked stunned when I answered.

"Hi." I smiled brightly.

"Hi," he said slowly, clearly confused. "Is Sam here?"

"Yeah," I answered as two women joined him in the hall.

"Did you want to come in?" I asked them all, stepping back, holding the door open.

I closed the door behind the three and noticed that the blonde was carrying a large casserole dish. It was covered in tin foil and she was carrying it with potholders.

"Oh geez." I smiled at her. "Here, bring that in the kitchen and put it down. I'm so sorry, I didn't see you were holding anything."

She smiled wanly and followed me through the living room to the kitchen. I moved the teakettle off the burner so she could put the food down.

"Thank you," she said quickly, and her voice was beautiful.

Round tones like she'd been to boarding school or something.

Lots of diction classes. "It's hot and it was getting very heavy."

"What is it?"

"Veal piccata."

"Mmmm," I nodded. Eww, so not a fan of veal, I try not to eat baby anything. "Yummy." I held out my hand to her then.

"Hi, I'm Jory Keyes."

"Oh, well, it's lovely to meet you, Jory. I'm Christine Montero and out there in the other room are my brother Jeff and my friend Donna Norton."

"Great," I nodded. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Well," she grimaced, "I think we're supposed to be having dinner."

"Oh?"

"Yes, um, my brother made a dinner date with Sam about a week ago. I was supposed to cook my specialty that my brother's apparently been bragging about and Sam was going to supply the salad and the wine," she clarified for me. "That was the plan anyway."

"Oh," I said, completely unsure of what I was supposed to do at that point. How awkward was this. Worse was that this had been so inconsequential to Sam that he had seemingly not even remembered it. "I see. Well let's ask him if he made it to the store."

She followed me back out to the living room.

"Jeff," Christine smiled uneasily at him, "I think perhaps this sort of slipped Sam's mind."

"What?"

"I told you to call him and confirm," she said crisply, her tone almost sharp.

"No," Jeff shook his head, giving me a quick look. "He's not like that, he's got this covered."

It took everything in me not to smile. The man so did not have this covered.

"Hi," the other woman leaned forward to offer me her hand. "I'm Donna Norton, and you are?"

"Jory." I smiled at her. "Good to meet you," I said, looking over at Jeff.

"Hey," he smiled tightly. "Jeffrey Montero. I live down the hall there in 5G."

"Oh, neighbors," I blurted. "Great."

"J?" Sam called from the bedroom. "Why don't you come in here and—"

"I'm in the living room," I cut him off, and because I knew he'd just got out of the shower I was kind instead of the bitchy I felt. "And you have guests."

"What?" He came around the corner, half naked, all the rippling muscles there on display, the sculpted chest and the washboard abs. The jeans rode low on his tapered hips, top button open to reveal the white of the briefs underneath. He should have been on a billboard somewhere, the man was that mouthwatering. His smile as soon as he saw everyone was huge. "Oh, hey," he chuckled, pointing back to the bedroom. "Just gimme a sec."

It took an excruciatingly long time for him to find a T-shirt because the silence was oppressive. Jeff was downright glaring at me and Donna just looked like she was going to burst into laughter at any second. Christine had her arms crossed over her chest. Her face was unreadable.

"Hey, sorry," Sam apologized, coming back into the room.

He walked to my side and put a hand on my shoulder.

"What's up?"

"Dinner," I told him, tuning to look up into his face. "You told Christine—"

"No, he told Jeff," Christine corrected me, smiling at Sam, moving to stand a little closer to him.

"Oh," I said, stepping away from Sam so his hand dropped off of me.

"Sorry. You told Jeff that tonight would be good for dinner. Did you remember to pick up wine and salad on your way home?"

His grin was just out of control, flirtatious and evil at the same time.

"You're pissed."

"What?"

"You are." His eyes were sparkling as he turned from me to Jeff. "I'm sorry, man, I completely forgot about this. With all the shi—stuff going on at

work, I just spaced it. Can we reschedule?"

"Christine made her specialty," I informed him. "It's on the stove."

"Oh," he nodded. "Okay, well then I can run and get something now if you guys aren't in a big hurry."

"No, we're not in any hurry." Jeff smiled at him. "I'll go with ya."

"No-no. It's freezin' outside, man, stay here and I'll just run over to Ponti's. You guys want like, antipasto and some Chianti?"

"Sounds great," Christine said gently. "I can make the run with you. I don't want you to go alone."

He turned and looked at me. I shrugged before I said, "It's veal." And tilted my head to the side with a snap of my neck.

I knew the attitude was just dripping off of me but I didn't care.

"Veal?" I saw his jaw muscles flex. Apparently he didn't like to eat babies either.

"Mmmm-hmmm," I said cheerfully.

"Huh," he chuckled, turning back to Christine. "Okay, let's go."

I was left alone with Jeff and Donna, who immediately sort of closed ranks and started talking in low whispers. It was really very rude, and even when I offered them each something to drink, they just declined and went back to talking. Instead of just standing there getting mad, I walked around the apartment that I'd still not really explored.

Sam lived in Lincoln Park and his apartment was on the fifth floor and had one of those cool old elevators that you had to close two metal grate doors to get going. The apartment itself was very cozy, lots of brown, tan, taupe, black, and rust colors everywhere. The black leather couch and chair, American Indian print rug, cherrywood coffee table, and a butcher-block

kitchen table with tall, straight-backed chairs flanking it were what the eye saw immediately.

It was a clean, clutter-free space.

In his bedroom there was a sleigh bed in cherry and matching armoire, a leather weave rug, and a down comforter. Paintings of the desert adorned the walls and there was nothing—no knickknacks or little dishes to hold stuff like a watch or a ring—anywhere in his place. His home exuded a masculine vibe without lacking details like candles or scattered pieces of art. In the second bedroom was his computer, weights, and a daybed covered in brick and burnt orange colored pillows. In the living room the TV, DVD player, Wii, PlayStation, and stereo were all housed in a huge cherrywood entertainment center that was flush against the wall. There were assorted shelves on the walls beside it, and I walked over to those and looked at the faces of strangers who were all apparently dear to him.

I gazed at a wedding picture, another of some men at a firehouse, a black and white studio picture of his parents—his mother a vision, his father very dashing—more wedding photos, and one of him and all his buddies from days spent in the Marine Corps. There were a lot of framed shots and I found that I liked that there were all these people in his life that loved him.

"So, Jory, how do you know Sam?" Jeff asked, walking over to me.

I looked up at him. "We go way back," I lied.

"How far back can you go?" Donna winked at me, stepping around the other side of me. "What are you, all of eighteen?"

"Twenty-two," I corrected her.

"Oooh, that's ancient," she teased me.

I looked at her. "Why? How old are you?"

"Sacrilege," she laughed.

I liked her. "You wanna drink now that you're done being bitchy?"

"I would love one," she sighed, looking me up and down.

"What happened to your eye?"

"I walked into a door."

"I see," she nodded, clearly not believing a word of it.

"What do you do for a living, Jory?"

"I'm an office assistant."

"Really. You don't model?"

I scoffed.

She gave me a knowing smile. "Darling, with your skin and those big dark eyes and that body you could model. I work for Pulse Magazine. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

I looked at her as she stepped forward, brushing my hair back from my face. "How do you get blond hair and brown eyes? That's amazing."

"Hey, we're home," Sam announced as he came through the door.

I turned and looked at him. I was so happy he was back.

"What?" he asked, glancing at Jeff, his brows furrowing.

The look suggested he was annoyed.

"Sam, you should tell your friend over here to let me introduce him to some photographers I know. I think he could model if he wanted."

"Oh yeah?" The smile came instantly as he dropped the takeout and wine on the couch and strode over to me. His fingers slid under my chin as he raised

it to look down into my eyes. "You wanna do that, J?"

I trembled under his touch and stopped breathing.

"No?" He was speaking to Donna but his eyes never left my face. "He's not really model material."

"Oh? Why not?"

"'Cause I said so."

"And you're the boss of him, are you?"

He looked back down into my eyes and stroked his fingers up my throat to my jaw. "Yep. He's mine."

And that basically ended any plans that Christine Montero had for she and Sam Kage.

"What would possess you to say that?" I asked him fifteen minutes later as we stood in the kitchen with salad and Chianti, the veal having left with Christine.

"Say what?"

"Are you kidding? You basically outed yourself in front of those people."

"Why do you care?"

"'Cause you tell me you're not gay and then you go and announce to those people that you are and—"

"I didn't tell those people I was gay."

"Yeah, ya pretty much did."

He shrugged broad shoulders. "So what?"

I was floored.

"Why're you lookin' at me like that?"

"You're amazing."

The smile was wicked and brought out his dimples.

"Thanks."

"It's not a compliment," I clarified for him.

He laughed at me and I realized how much he was enjoying this.

I hoped my scowl was as dark as I was trying for. "And it was a really crappy thing to do to Christine."

"What are you talking about?"

"She liked you, idiot."

He shook his head, putting antipasto on two plates. I was sitting on the counter watching him, the bottle of wine between my legs, trying to work the opener.

"What?"

"You're crazy." He smiled at me, his eyes firing, the laugh lines deepening.

"C'mon, Detective, did you see how upset she was? She is totally pissed off, my friend."

"Whatever."

"And Jeff. I hope he's not like a good friend or something."

"He's not."

"Good."

"Why do you care?"

"I don't, that was just way harsh is all."

"What was?"

"That for whatever reason, Jeff thought you wanted to meet his sister. What did you say to him?"

"I have no idea."

"When did you set this dinner date up?"

"Again, no clue."

"And do you regularly eat veal?" I asked, the disgust clear in my voice.

"No, never."

"Huh, so Jeff's over here and—"

"Talking about her, I guess."

"And you said what? Yeah, cool, bring her on by?"

He chuckled deeply. "Seriously, I couldn't recount our conversation if my life depended on it."

"Oh?"

He smiled at me wickedly. "You're jealous and I'm diggin' it."

"I am not jealous."

"Oh no?"

"No."

"I see." He continued to smile as he took the bottle from me and easily pulled out the cork. He stepped between my legs. "So you weren't completely bent that she was here?"

"I thought you didn't realize she liked you."

"I didn't, but you did, and so I'm thinking you were rattled."

"As if."

He put his hands down on either side of me and looked at me hard.

"Really?"

I was lost in his smoky blue eyes and so I sighed deeply and came clean.

"Of course I was jealous, you moron. Why wouldn't I be?"

"No need," he assured me, leaning in.

Food forgotten, wine forgotten, too busy kissing him, his hands on my thighs as he yanked me forward on the counter and into his arms.

"Wrap your legs around me," he said, his voice like full of gravel, deep and low.

I did as I was asked and he carried me to the bedroom, an arm wrapped around my waist, his hand caressing my ass. He nuzzled my throat as I stretched it out for him.

"I love your ass," he whispered against my ear.

"It's all yours," I promised him.

And when I heard his breath catch I had to smile. It seemed that maybe Detective Kage liked having me around as much as I liked being around. It was a small miracle.

* * * *

It was late when I woke up in his bed. I had both my arms wrapped around him and a leg over his hip. I was pressed tight against his chest.

"Sorry," I said softly, shifting away from him. I knew it had to be hard for him to sleep with me like that. "I didn't mean to—"

"Stop." He put an arm around my back, holding me against him.

"What were you doing?" I asked drowsily, realizing he hadn't been asleep.

"Watching you sleep."

"That's weird. Close your eyes."

"I'm just having trouble wrapping my mind around this."

"What?" I was groggy, not totally awake yet.

"You being here in my bed."

"Do you want me out of it? Should I go sleep in the guest room?"

"No. That's not what I mean."

"What do you mean then?"

"Even if I explain it, you won't understand."

"Why?"

"It just won't make sense to you is all."

"Because?"

"Because you've always been gay."

I moved away from him, looking at his profile in the dark.

"You're the first and only man I have ever been in bed with."

"I know."

"It's something, lemme tell you."

I let out a long breath. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Stupid question. It's all I want."

"How come?"

"Cause being in bed with you, it's different."

"How different?"

"Like I always figured it was supposed to feel," he said, staring into my eyes.

I felt the tremor run through me and curl my toes.

"I didn't know it would be like this."

I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow.

"What're you doing?"

"I have a confession." I smiled, my voice muffled.

"Oh yeah, what's that?" he asked, yanking the pillow away so he could hear me.

"I left the apartment today."

"You what?"

"I left," I said, turning my face to look at him, smiling lazily. "With your mother."

"What?" He looked confused.

I just stared at him until he got it.

"Oh shit," he groaned suddenly, hands in his hair, lying back on his pillow. "It's Friday, I forgot all about... oh fuck me," he half-yelled before he reached out and pulled me over on top of him. His hands went to my face, his fingers smoothing over my eyebrows, pushing the hair out of my eyes. "I'm so sorry, J, did she give you the third degree and tell you—"

"She was an angel," I told him, sliding my hand across his chest, just wanting to touch him. "She made me breakfast and we talked for like hours and then she took me for pie."

He reached out and turned on the light on the nightstand.

"What?"

"I wanna see your face."

I smiled down at him. "Are you okay?"

"She fed you?"

"Yeah."

"My mother fed you?"

"Yes."

"And she took you for pie?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "And you know what, if Regina Rappaport was my mother, I'd have T-shirts made."

"You knew who my mother was?"

"Yeah, of course. Everybody knows."

"You'd be surprised who doesn't know."

"She's so beautiful," I told him.

"You're beautiful," he assured me, fingers lightly tracing my black eye.

"Even beat up, I know women that aren't as pretty as you."

"I don't think—"

He chuckled and I had to smile in spite of myself. "I know you don't, baby."

I shoved his hands away and he laughed as I tried to smother him with my pillow.

"We had a good time," I told him as I scooted away from him to the cold part of the bed. "She invited me for Sunday dinner."

"Did she?"

"Yessir."

"You with my entire family. I don't fuckin' think so."

"Why?"

"Well, because I don't feel like explaining you being gay to everybody right now."

"And why would you? I didn't tell her. I told her you had to take care of me. That's all you gotta say."

"That simple."

"Sure."

"Come here," he said softly, reaching for me, tucking me back against his side, his hand moving to the small of my back. "Don't move unless I tell you."

Sam liked being the one in charge; he was a very demanding lover and being with him was heaven for me because of it.

"Look at me."

I lifted my chin and he leaned and kissed me. It was slow, sensual, and I felt the heat roll through me.

"You can't get enough of me," he said, arrogantly pleased.

I didn't need to answer.

"What're you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I'm lucky," I answered, shifting, rising over him.

"Yeah, you are lucky. You oh... oh. Goddamn."

Head back, body rigid, hands weaved through my hair as he called my name; I smiled before I took him in my mouth again. The look in his eyes when our eyes met, full of me, full of trust and surrender, made my heart hurt.

Chapter Eleven

I was lying on the couch the following evening answering Dane's e-mails and building his schedule for the following week when Sam came out and sat on the couch behind me.

"J?"

I looked over my shoulder at him. "You all right? You got all quiet after the Farmer's Market this afternoon." It had been weird. He was fine in the car on the way over, but while we were there he had slowly withdrawn until he finally went silent. I had racked my brain thinking of what I could have done. "Did I do something?"

"No, sorry."

"You don't hafta be sorry. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I just have to meet my buddies out and there's nothing I can do about it. We go every weekend."

"That's fine, I can entertain myself." I yawned, going back to my Excel spreadsheet. "Besides, I got a ton of shit to do."

"But I don't want you out at some—"

"No," I cut him off. "I'll call a few friends and catch a movie or something if I get done." I leaned back between his legs and kissed the inside of his thigh. "I'll be good."

"Okay," he said, getting up. "Thanks."

"No problem." I yawned again, realizing that I had booked two appointments for the same day. "Crap."

It had been a cold, wet, frigid day and the night was no different. As I sat there on the thick rug with my hot cup of tea, the roaring fire, in a really old pair of jeans, socks, and T-shirt, I was feeling very cozy. I was ordering Chinese when he walked back into the room.

"What's going on? I thought you were going out?"

I shook my head as I hung up the phone. "Nah. I'm gonna have hot and sour soup and Mu Shu pork instead. I don't feel like goin' out at all."

"You don't?"

I looked up at him. "No. Hey, you look nice."

"Oh yeah?"

The faded Levi 501s were hugging his legs like a second skin; the thick turtleneck was bulky but still gave you the idea that the chest and shoulders were massive underneath. He pulled on his black leather jacket and adjusted it as he stared at me.

"Yeah. You look great."

"Okay... so, you have a nice night, J. Don't wait up."

"Nope." I smiled at him before returning my attention to my laptop. "See ya later."

I heard the door close and I got up to lock it as I went to get a refill on my tea.

Dane's schedule took forever, and by the time my food came I still wasn't even halfway through it. The e-mail he had sent me the day before also said he wanted me to work up the anticipated revenue for the coming quarter. I could do it but it always took me a little longer to do the formulas.

* * * *

The bump woke me and I jerked to the left, hitting the floor so hard that I knocked the wind out of myself. I had rolled off the couch and ended up more under it than beside it. The TV was off, the room silent, bathed in blue shadows and moonlight. The fire had died without attention and it was really cold. There was a scrape and the jingle of keys and the door opened. I leaned sideways and saw the couple in silhouette from the hall light for a moment before the door was closed with a rattle of unhooked chain. Wrapped in each other's arms, kissing ferociously, neither of them taking a breath, together looking like the picture of raging passion.

There were grunts, moans, and whimpers and then her coat hit the floor, followed by the high heel that came to rest inches from where I was hiding.

"I missed you."

The sultry-voiced confession was low and husky and I saw them again for a moment, shadows moving in the soft glow of the streetlight, man and woman tangled up in heat. They were pulling and yanking at each other, spilling into the darkness before he suddenly threw her over his shoulder like firemen do and carried her off toward his bedroom, the giggling and squealing echoing down the short hallway.

I rolled out from where I was, stood up, and waited.

Waited to see if I was wrong. Waited to wake up. Waited for something to tell me that this was not reality and I was only dreaming. Nothing happened except the slamming of the bedroom door. When I moved I realized that, unlike my place, his floorboards did not creak. So I was able to walk in my socks on his hardwood floors and stand outside his door without making a sound. Frozen there, feeling like a stalker, I listened outside his bedroom. I heard the moaning and stood there, frozen, torn between throwing open the door and exposing his lie, cracking it just a sliver to see, to make sure and confirm what I knew anyway, or just walking away. I had to know for sure; at the same time my flight response was screaming in my head. Stupid, but I had to see, to make sure, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Sam Kage was screwing some woman in the same bed I had been in the night

before. I shivered hard and reached for the door handle just as the lights went on.

I turned as Sam closed the front door, tossed his keys on the table beside the loveseat, and dumped his jacket on the couch.

"Hey." He yawned before he smiled at me. "You're home."

I stared at him, at the door, and back at him. "I never left."

"Yeah, I know you said that but... c'mere."

I was rooted to the spot. I had to get my brain around him not being in the bedroom.

He scowled at me. "What's wrong with you?"

I pointed at the bedroom door. "There are two people screwing in your bed." Which wasn't as eloquent an explanation as it could have been but it did make my point.

"What?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I thought it was you."

"What're you talking about?"

"I thought you brought some woman home and took her to bed."

The look was dark, half scowl/half anger. "You had my word on that."

"I don't know you. What's your word worth to me?"

"My word is good. If I say it, I mean it."

I shrugged. "Okay. I didn't know, now I do."

"If you don't believe me or what I say, maybe you should go."

"Maybe I should."

We stared at each other a long time before he suddenly barked at me. "I'm not even in there and I'm in fuckin'

trouble. How is that fuckin' fair?" He had become exasperated in minutes. It was funny.

"I dunno but could ya stop swearing, please?"

He growled at me as he crossed the room, stopping close enough that I had to step back and tilt my head up to meet his gaze. He was so much taller than me, the top of my head coming only to his shoulder.

"Am I staying or am I going?" I asked him softly, trembling suddenly.

"This isn't working," he muttered, sounding miserable.

"What? Me?" I asked, staring up into his eyes. "Do you want me to go?"

"No, me. I gotta go."

That made no sense at all. "What are you talking about?"

Do you even know?"

His eyes were locked on mine. "You live here, J. You're comfortable here in my place, in your skin... I'm the one having a goddamn mental breakdown."

I smiled suddenly and leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his waist, squeezing tight. "It's good you're home. I missed you." My voice was husky and cracked on the last.

"And I'm so glad you're not in bed with some woman."

He stroked my hair and I heard the deep sigh as he tilted my head back so he could see my eyes. "I didn't wanna go. I wanted to sit on the couch and watch you do your computer shit."

"Then you should've stayed home with me," I said, wetting my lips, drawing his attention there. "'Cause I missed you."

Slowly he bent forward... and we both heard the giggle from the other side of the door. "What the hell?" he said before he grabbed the handle and threw open the door. There was a quick scream from the darkness as he flipped on the lights. "Oh fuck me," he groaned loudly.

I peeked around the corner and there was a man that actually looked nothing like Detective Kage sitting in bed beside a woman who kind of did. She was clutching my comforter to her breast. When she saw me, her eyes got even bigger.

"What the fuck is going on?" Sam roared at them.

"Sammy, it's not what ya think," the woman said gently.

"Oh no? Well, I think that my married sister is screwing her husband's best friend in my bed. That's what I fuckin'

think. Tell me if I'm missing something, Jen."

She bit her bottom lip and I went from curious and confused to nurturing and concerned. She looked so sad sitting there with tears in her eyes, trembling, that I slipped into the room, grabbed the Kleenex off the chest of drawers, and walked the box over to her.

Her eyes flicked up to mine. "Thank you."

I smiled gently and she shivered hard.

"Who're you?"

"I'm Jory," I said, and when she reached for my hand I gave it to her, squeezing back. "I'll make you some tea."

"No tea!" Sam yelled again. "Just get the fuck out of my bed! Get outta my house!"

I patted her hand when she tried to pull it away. "It's okay," I soothed her. "He's just loud. You must know that by now."

"I don't know what to—"

"It's okay," I said, squeezing her hand again gently.

"J," Sam began, the warning there in his voice. "Don't start with me or—"

I gave him a look.

"You and your goddamn tea!" he snapped at me. "You know you—"

"Stop screaming like an idiot. We can all hear you."

"I want them—"

"Just stop," I said quietly, staring at him. "This is not what we need right now."

"Jory." She breathed out my name.

I looked back at her and saw her mouth open, eyes huge as she stared up at me.

"Tea good?"

She nodded slowly, uncertain.

I turned and left the room, scowling at him as I passed him.

"Why are you lookin' at me like that?"

I went to the kitchen that I had reorganized the day before and filled the kettle with bottled water before I put it on the stove to boil.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he roared at me as he walked into the kitchen.

"I'm making tea."

"I know you're making fuckin' tea. Why?"

"Because your sister needs to talk, Sam. She's really hurting, can't you tell?"

"I don't give a shit, J. She's been fuckin' her husband's best friend in my bed for who knows how long. She's a goddamn whore!"

"Stop yelling at me."

He glared at me and I gave that look right back to him.

"You have no right to—"

"You're being an ass."

"Jory—"

"She's your sister and you're being a real jerk right now instead of what she needs."

"What?"

"You need to show a little compassion."

"Compassion?" He was indignant.

"Yes. Compassion. Pass me the tin in the left cabinet."

He moved right.

"Your other left."

He gave me a scolding look and opened the next cabinet.

After he passed me the tin he looked back at the shelves and the contents.

"What the fuck is all this shit?"

"I went grocery shopping with your mother."

"When?" He looked at me.

"After the bakery. We needed some more stuff."

"You bought all this stuff?"

"Yes."

"How can you afford—"

"I'm not some starving college student, Detective. I have a decent job, ya know."

He moved to another cabinet and then the refrigerator.

"There's a lot of food in here."

"Like you'd know."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You eat like a frat boy. I'm changing your diet."

"Like hell you are."

"Pass me the vanilla creamer out of the fridge."

He yanked open the door and everything that was glass inside jingled.

"Try not to break anything."

"I don't have any... oh," he grunted, and passed me the bottle.

I got out spoons and a dishtowel from another drawer, some cinnamon and a lemon. I wasn't sure what his sister and her lover took in their tea.

"You moved all my shit around."

"The way you had it set up made no sense," I said, getting out the small chopping board I had picked up at Crate and Barrel, along with a paring knife.

"I don't care how you think I should—"

"Pots and pans go next to the stove because you cook with them," I explained, educating him. "Tupperware goes next to the fridge 'cause once it's filled that's where it goes.

Everything has a place, but apparently you never got that memo."

"What are you doing?"

It was obvious that I was cutting up a lemon. "Am I really expected to answer that?"

He made a noise and muttered under his breath that his sister was not staying.

"Oh no?"

"No," he assured me, his voice rising again.

I smiled lazily and finished cutting the lemon in quarters before getting out the teapot and filling the holder with leaves to put inside it.

"What are you wearing?" he asked out of the blue.

I stopped and looked down at my jeans before I looked back at him. "I was wearing these when you left."

"You were?"

"Yeah," I chuckled.

"You don't wear those things out, do ya?"

My jeans were faded almost white, old and threadbare with more holes than fabric, but they fit like a soft second skin.

"Sure," I teased him, lying.

"You know you should really be more careful of me. I could hurt you when she leaves."

"Is that a promise?" I smiled at him, arching a brow for his benefit.

"Come here."

And I would have if his sister's voice hadn't stopped me.

"Sammy."

We both turned to her as she leaned on the counter.

"I just—"

"Tell me something," Sam sighed deeply, raking his hands through his hair.

"Tell me this is new, tell me this is the first fuckin' time, and please tell me I haven't been sleeping on the same sheets you guys have been fuckin' on for like months now."

I saw the guy standing in the background. He was unsure whether to go or stay.

"Sam, we—"

"You have kids, Jen," he said to his sister, his voice hollow.

"So do you, Kurt," he looked past her to her lover. "What the fuck?"

"Sammy, we—" his sister began.

"Jesus Christ, Jen, you need to—"

"Can you reach those for me?" I interrupted him.

He looked at me and saw where I was pointing up to the new teacups I had bought at the Farmer's Market earlier in the day. They were hand-painted, the kind you used at a Chinese restaurant with no handles except they were larger.

When he didn't move, I asked again.

"Please."

He rolled his eyes but got the cups down.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"

I looked at his sister and smiled. "Jory."

She nodded. "Jory. It's a real pleasure to meet you."

I smiled at her and motioned Kurt over. "Take a seat."

He gave Sam a tentative look before he moved to the counter and took a seat on one of the barstools. We were all silent, and when the kettle whistled, Jen's whole body jerked like she was startled. I took her hand briefly before I filled the teapot with the boiling water. I rattled on about how everyone liked something different. I myself preferred oolong this late at night, but had gone with chamomile since it was universally liked. Both Jen and Kurt nodded.

"What do you like in it?" I asked her.

After several moments of her just staring at me, she asked me for the creamer, Kurt the cinnamon. I poured mine and added nothing. Sam just scowled at me when I asked him if he wanted any.

"You're the guy my mom took to the bakery yesterday,"

Jen said suddenly, really studying my face.

"Yes."

"She had a great time."

"I did too."

She nodded slowly and I reached out for her hand.

"Are you okay?"

Another nod as her eyes filled again.

I came around the counter quickly and she reached for me as I opened up my arms.

"For crissakes, J," Sam groaned. "Can't they just get the fuck out?"

"I could—" Kurt began.

"Just never mind him," I soothed Kurt, clutching Jen tight as she buried her face in my shoulder and sobbed. "You guys need to talk to somebody. Carrying this around has gotta be just awful."

Jen pulled back to look up into my face. "How do you know?"

"Cause keeping secrets is a killer and guilt is even worse."

"Yes, it is."

"So tell me," I urged, my voice soft as I wiped away her tears, my fingers featherlight on her cheeks.

Her smile through the tears was breathtaking. "Okay."

Jennifer Levine was madly in love with Kurt Pratt and he with her. They had known each other for seventeen years but had just discovered that their friendly banter and constant chemistry was rooted in more than the fact that she was the wife of Kurt's best friend. They were more than simply

extensions of Mitch Levine; they were two people crazy about each other. Between them they had seven kids and spouses that loved them. They had decided to just leave it as a fling so that no one got hurt, but it had quickly taken the turn from passion to affection to love.

"People are gonna be hurt, Jen," Sam assured her as he paced back and forth through the living room.

"Mitch is gonna be crushed, and I know Rita," he told Kurt.

"Man, she'll lose her mind."

Kurt nodded, sipping the tea I had put in front of him. "I know."

"What's your plan?" he asked his sister, his attention back on her.

"I have no idea." She laughed hollowly. "This was the plan.

Every Saturday night, but...." She looked at Kurt. "I find myself living for this day, waiting all week. I'm useless except for this."

I watched Kurt's eyes, saw the same misery there.

"We usually just talk." His smile was bittersweet as his hand tangled with hers. "Don't we, baby?"

She nodded. "And sometimes we don't."

"Did you use Mom's keys to get in here?" Sam asked her.

"Yes. She had two sets She's going to wonder where the last one is since I guess she gave a set to Jory yesterday."

Her eyes were locked on him.

"I'll give her back a set."

"I left them on the nightstand."

He nodded.

"What're you guys gonna do?" I asked her.

"I have no idea." She smiled at me through her tears.

She had the same beautiful eyes as her brother, the same mouth with the full bottom lip and the thin upper one; his nose was long and straight and his profile belonged on coins, her nose was small, upturned at the end. They had the same golden-brown hair, the bronze, copper, and wheat highlights in it, thick and wavy. She was the kind of woman men would watch walk by on the street, with her hourglass figure, flawless skin, and flashing eyes. I appreciated her beauty even though Sam was the one who had me mesmerized.

"Hey," I said softly.

Sam looked at me.

"Could you get the fire going again? It's getting cold in here."

"The radiator's on."

"Like I said." I smiled at him. "It's cold. Make it happen, Kage."

Exasperated sigh as he crossed the room to the fireplace.

"Jory."

I looked back at Jennifer.

"Who are you again?"

"Just a friend."

She nodded, glanced over at Sam and then back at me.

"Will I see you at the house tomorrow for Sunday dinner?"

Her eyes were absorbing me and I had no idea why.

"I dunno."

"You should come. You really should."

"We'll see," I said, reaching for her hand. "What can I do right now?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. We're gonna leave and you and Sam are going to keep our secret."

Sam stayed busy with the fire and didn't turn around to look at her.

"Okay, Sammy?"

"Whatever you say."

I hugged her tight and then she walked over to Sam and put her hand on his back. Because he didn't move, I cleared my throat. His exhale was loud; I heard it across the room before he rose and stood in front of her.

"I'm sorry, Sammy."

He nodded, just staring into her eyes. I watched her tremble, knew what she needed. I coughed and he looked over at me.

I widened my eyes and I saw the muscle in his jaw working before he suddenly grabbed his sister into a bone-crushing hug. Instantly, she was clutching him just as tight, burying her face in his shoulder, sobbing.

"I'm so glad you were here," Kurt whispered, hand on my shoulder from behind, gently squeezing.

I looked over my shoulder at him and he nodded at me, smiling just slightly. My heart went out to him, and to her, to both of them because it had to just be miserable where they were.

When they left, Sam walked them to the door and dead bolted the lock after them. He went immediately to the bedroom and I cleaned up the kitchen. Everything had to be back in its place. I found him, minutes later, sitting on the floor beside the washing machine, the sheets from the bed piled beside him.

"What's wrong?"

"That should be fairly obvious."

I moved to his side, crouching down, looking into his eyes.

"I'm sorry about your sister, but I'm sure she and Kurt will—"

"Not that," he cut me off. "I'm all twisted up and you—"

I leaned forward, cupped his face in my palm, and kissed him. He tried to lift his head away, but as soon as I ran my tongue over the seam of his lips he parted them for me. I tilted his head up so I could bear down on him, plunging my tongue deep into his mouth, tasting him as I maneuvered into his lap, my knees on either side of his thighs, straddling his hips.

The moan that came out of him made me smile before he pushed me back, breaking the kiss.

"What?"

"Stop, I gotta tell you something."

"What?" I panted, staring into his eyes, worried.

He ran his thumb over my bottom lip before he lifted his head and pulled me down to kiss me breathless. I wrapped my arms around his neck and devoured him. I kissed him like he belonged to me and I had all the time in the world. The hand that gripped my hair and yanked my head back made me cry out.

"At the market today, I wanted to touch you but I couldn't.

People would've looked and... and I've been bitched at before by girls I've been with, 'cause I'm not a guy that likes to be touched a lot and I don't do the whole hand-holding and all that shit... but today, with you... you drive me crazy and I gotta have my hands on you all the fuckin' time and it scares the shit outta me. I don't... I mean, there I was, dying to grab you and I couldn't. I couldn't...."

"It's okay." I smiled down at him, shifting in his lap, feeling how hard he was under me. "You can touch me now. You can do whatever you want to me now."

The groan made me smile. "Get up."

I rose up off of him and he grabbed me as Kurt had grabbed Jen earlier, throwing me over his shoulder, carrying me back to the couch. He lifted the coffee table out of the way and threw one of the neatly folded afghans at the end of the couch into the middle of the floor, in front of the fire. I opened it up and spread it where he wanted, as he stripped in the light of the flickering flames. He looked like some bronzed god and I couldn't help the gasp that came out of me.

"Go get the stuff. Hurry up."

I ran to get the lube from the bedroom, not worrying if my scrambling and frantic movement made me look too eager. I didn't care if he knew how much I wanted him and wanted to please him. When I returned he was on the floor, stretched out, relaxed and waiting. I let my eyes wander all over the powerful frame—not an ounce of fat on the man anywhere, just rippling muscle and sleek skin.

"Come here."

I moved slowly, making him wait, stripping out of my jeans and shirt as he watched me with hungry eyes. The gaze was all heat and I shivered, seeing that he wanted me.

"Jesus, J, you look like you're made outta gold."

Voice gone, all I could do was stare at him.

His breath was coming in stuttering bursts as his hands reached for me, pulling me down beside him, cupping my face to bring my mouth to his. "You're killing me."

I smiled against his lips; letting him roll me over on my stomach and pin me to the floor. His mouth was on my shoulder, one hand under me, stroking me, the other clutching my hip as he spread my legs with his knee. I had no idea what kind of a lover Sam Kage was before me. I couldn't speak to his prowess with women, but with me, he was everything I craved: physically demanding, rough, possessive, and absolutely in control. I was there to be manhandled and ravaged and I was more than willing to be submissive to him. It was amazing to me that anyone that had ever been in bed with him before would let him go.

The second time we made it to his bed, after he'd hastily made it, and he stared into my eyes the entire time. That had never happened to me before. I had never had anyone care enough to watch me, to make sure that I was sated along with them. He was a ravenous lover and I was more than willing to be devoured.

Later, as I trailed my fingers up and down the deep groove of his back, I heard his breathing even out. If I stayed there I wouldn't be able to keep from touching him and kissing him.

He needed his rest, so I got up and went out into the living room to watch TV. I must have dozed off because the room was dark when I felt the warm hand on my back and then lips right behind my ear.

"Love the purring." His voice was soft. "Get up and come to bed."

"Why are you up?" I whispered, not really awake, shivering in the cold, barely able to see him in the darkness of the room.

"Cause I couldn't find you," he said, lightly kissing the side of my neck. "And I woke up and needed you."

I smiled because I liked the attention I was getting, his hand on my ass, kneading and squeezing before he gently slapped it.

"So is it me you want or my ass?"

He chuckled close to my ear, which put goose bumps all over my body.
"Both. Come to bed."

"Can't sleep without me, huh?" I teased him, groggy as I got up and staggered to the bedroom, his hands on my shoulders, steering me there.

"No, I can't," he told me before he shoved me down on the bed.

"You're getting used to having me around."

"Just shut up," he grumbled, "and lie down."

But I was right—no matter what he said, I was habit-forming.

"God, you're freezing," he muttered, getting into bed beside me, covering us both with the sheet and blanket.

I snuggled in tight against him. "And you're so warm."

He groaned loudly, tucking my head under his chin as I wrapped my arms around his chest, slipping my leg between his.

"You need me."

"Apparently," he grumbled, rubbing his face in my hair.

"Now go to sleep already."

And I felt like it so I did.

Chapter Twelve

We parked around the block because there was no room on the street anywhere near his parents' house. He put a hand on my shoulder and led me down the alley that ran behind the two-story, A-frame, redbrick home. When we came in through the back door into the kitchen, I heard my name called.

"Jory!"

Regina was on me instantly, her arms open to receive me, and as we hugged each other tight I heard Sam's grunt of approval from behind me.

"I brought Jory, Mom, if that's okay," he laughed softly.

She pulled back to smile into my face. "Since I called you this morning and demanded you bring him with you... yes, Sammy it's okay. How are you, my darling?"

"I'm good." I smiled into her eyes.

We stared a few minutes before she let me go and grabbed my hand, dragging me over to where she was chopping potatoes and onions.

"I'm going to teach you how to make Hungarian goulash."

It sounded scary but I was game. "Okay."

Sam left me and I heard the shouts of his name as the swinging door closed behind him.

I stayed in the kitchen and helped his mother with dinner, alternating between preparations and dishwashing and listening to her talk. When Sam's sisters showed up with their husbands and kids, I was introduced to everyone. Jen came with her husband Mitch, and gave me a big hug when she pretended to meet me for the first time.

"Jesus, Jen," Mitch chuckled, shaking my hand afterward.

"Don't crush the kid."

"He's not a kid," she said as she stared into my eyes. "He's got a very old soul."

"Oh does he?" Mitch teased her, pulling her sideways to kiss her temple. "You're adorable."

And I saw her flinch, like every kindness was painful. The guilt was smothering her. "You wanna help me?" I asked, trying to give her some relief.

"Yes," she breathed out, taking off her coat and gloves, shoving them both at her husband. "I'd love to."

I was introduced to her daughters, Ally and Carla, and they both wanted to hug me. Carla touched my hair and told me how much she wanted gold hair instead of brown. I explained how much better brown was than gold. She gave me a look as she twirled her fingers in my hair.

"How come it's so long?"

"'Cause I need a haircut?" I answered, realizing that my hair now hit my shoulders.

"It's too pretty to cut, Jory," Jen told me. "I would kill for your highlights."

"Yes," Regina echoed her daughter. "You have beautiful, thick hair, leave it alone."

I shrugged and put Carla down on the counter so I could go back to cooking. I told her she could help me and pass me ingredients. It was cute how she scooted around, getting comfortable and then looking up at me expectantly. Her sister, being only two, had more interest in walking around the kitchen opening drawers and peering inside.

Sam came in the kitchen a half hour later with two other guys and his father. Amazing how much he looked like Thomas Kage. They were both big, tall men, but while Sam was covered in thick, hard, rippling muscle, his father had grown a little softer in the face and around his middle.

"I just think we should sell it, Dad, and get our money out of it. Who the fuck cares what these assholes want? They don't give a shit about you."

"Samuel Thomas Kage," Regina snapped at him. "It's the Lord's Day."

"Mother—"

"What's going on?" I asked quickly.

He looked over at me and I waited.

"My dad and I have a piece of property in Naperville that we need to sell."

"And?"

He tipped his head at the other two men. "These two have been saying they're gonna buy it for like three months but nothing's happening. I'm sick of holding onto it, so I wanna sell it."

"I see," I nodded, looking over at Mr. Kage. "What do you think, sir?"

"I'm sorry, who are you?" he asked me jovially.

"This is Sam's friend, Jory," Regina explained.

He nodded as he looked me over. "I see. Well, Jory, I think that I want to wait for my nephews Levi and Joseph to buy it."

I looked back at Sam. "If your dad wants to wait, why're you arguing with him?"

"Because it's crap. Half of it's mine and I wanna get rid of it. We could wait for years before these two jerks get enough money to—"

"Okay." I yawned. "Here's whatcha do. Let your dad win the argument this time and you got dibs on the next one."

Better to not be an ass where your family's concerned, right?"

"I'm being an ass?"

I gestured at his cousins. "Well, yeah. I mean, who cares how long it takes them? They're your cousins. Wait forever if you can help them out. What do you need the money for anyway?"

He glowered at me and I arched a brow for him as we shared a long look.

"Fine." He threw up his hands, stalking to the refrigerator for a beer. "I don't give a shit," he said before he left the room.

I shrugged and looked at his mother. "I think he enjoys the complaining more than anything."

"I would agree," she said quietly, nodding. "I think you've got him pegged right."

I went back to the dishes until I felt the hand on my back.

"Jory."

His dad was next to me, looking at my face.

"Yessir?"

"How long have you known Sam?"

"Not too long," I told him. "I actually got in a little trouble and he's helping me out."

"I see." He smiled warmly. "Well, thank you for speaking up. He actually owns fifty-one percent to my forty-nine, so if he wanted to, he could sell it."

"He won't if you don't want him to," I assured him. "But you know that."

"Do I?" He indulged me. "I don't know about that, Jory."

"I don't either." One of the men moved over to hold out his hand. "Joe Kage, man, good to meet you. This is my brother Levi."

I shook his hand and then his brother's. "Good to meet you both."

Levi smiled as he looked me straight in the eye. "And you, Jory."

The door swung open suddenly and Rachel, Sam's oldest sister, came in. "Oh Mother, how could you let your son bring that woman back over here after the last time?"

Regina chuckled. "Do you mean Alexandra?"

Her moan made everyone laugh. "Oh God, yes. Could she be any more condescending or conceited or... ohmygod Mother, she's such a bitch."

Regina laughed out loud. "Rachel!"

"Mother," Rachel said sharply, pointing out into the other room. "Do you have any idea what she just said to me?"

"No," she giggled, unable to stop.

"She said it was wonderful that I could throw away all my dreams to stay home and raise children. You're lucky I didn't smack her right there!"

"She's young dear, and—"

"Rach," a guy began as he walked into the room. "Why're you being such a jerk to Alex?"

"Ohmygod Mike, did you hear what she said to me?"

Michael Kage looked a lot like his brother, but where Sam's features were fine, chiseled perfection, Mike's were blunt and unfinished. He was still handsome—as far as I could tell all the Kage men were—but not one of them was as drop-dead gorgeous as Detective Sam Kage.

"Yeah, I heard, Rach, and she was only responding to you asking her if she wanted kids. I mean, could you be any more obvious? Just because I'm ready to settle down and get married and start a family doesn't mean she is. We've only been going out for three months. For crissakes, could ya lay off her?"

"I—"

"So she's different from you and Jen and all your friends.

Give her a break."

"Oh so, what? I'm the wicked witch because I chose to be a housewife?"

"That's not what I said. You just gotta—"

"C'mon, Mike," she huffed at him. "She's a prissy, snooty little—"

But she shut up instantly as the door opened and a woman walked into the kitchen. The lady in question was stunning but far too immaculately dressed, with perfect makeup and designer shoes, for a simple Sunday dinner in the suburbs.

"Hi," she said softly, her eyes glancing around the room. "I just—Jory?"

I forced the smile. "Hello, Miss Ralston."

She came into the kitchen, her entire focus on me. "How are you?"

"Good, thank you. And you?"

"I'm well," she said, her stiletto sling-backs clicking across the linoleum floor as she reached me. She brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes, all the

rest of it pulled up into a French twist. If Barbie could come to life, she would look like Alexandra Ralston. But not like Malibu Barbie or something simple like that. Alexandra would be the expensive kind, the one you never took out of the box. She was a collector's item, flawless, perfect, with beauty that was unattainable unless you, too, were encased in plastic.

"You look well," I said to be making conversation.

She bit her bottom lip and I saw her take a quick breath.

"How is Dane?"

"He's good."

"I was hoping to see him at the AIDS benefit."

What she had hoped was to be the highest bidder at the bachelor auction and thus win the privilege of going to dinner with him. I forgot about her when I was thinking of women that would have paid to be alone with him. He had definitely shortchanged the charity by just giving them a check for ten grand. He could have easily made them double that amount if he'd just bothered to show up.

"He made a sizable donation," I told her. "But you know he hates that kind of stuff."

She nodded, even though she had no idea what I was talking about. This, then, was why he had walked away from her. She loved being rich and all the social events that came along with it. Dane did only those things that were necessary.

They could not have been more different. "I haven't seen him in months."

I smiled, trying not to squirm.

"Will you give him my best when you see him tomorrow?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned and left the room and all eyes were on me.

"Jory, is it?" Michael asked me as he came closer.

"Yes."

"You know I met Alexandra Ralston after she came from Harcourt, Brown, and Cogan. Do you work for Dane Harcourt?"

"Yes."

"Are you his assistant?"

"Yes. Are you an architect too?"

"Yes, I am, though not in Dane Harcourt's league."

"I'm sure you're brilliant." I gave him my automatic response, because people complimented my boss all the time.

"Well, thank you, but your boss is amazing. I actually tried to get a job there but he said my sketches were rudimentary and unimaginative."

I squinted at him. "Were you there before lunch?"

"Pardon me?" I had surprised him. It was not the answer he'd been expecting.

"Lunch. Did you come, say, around ten-thirty?"

"I don't—"

"'Cause he's kind of worthless before lunch. If he's eaten and his blood sugar is balanced out, he's way nicer," I assured him, smiling.

"I'll keep it in mind for next time."

"Good," I nodded.

"Maybe I'll have you talk to him for me. Being his assistant, you must have quite a lot of pull."

"Yeah, right," I scoffed as my phone rang. "Speak of the devil. Excuse me," I said as I moved away from the others.

"Hey, boss."

"Is my schedule done for next week?"

"Of course. I e-mailed it this morning, didn't you see it?"

"No."

"Did you check?"

"No."

"Well, that could be the problem."

"Don't be flip."

"No sir."

"Did you leave Friday open for my trip to Dallas?"

"Yeah."

"Yes," he corrected me.

"Yes."

"I need to have a dinner party for a client tomorrow night.

You need to coordinate that for me now."

"Sure," I said quickly. "How many for dinner, boss?"

"Fifteen. I want to have a very intimate meal, so get the best, all right?"

"Of course."

"And I want you there, understand?"

"Aren't I always?"

"I'll see you in the morning."

"Yessir."

"Jory."

"What?"

"Don't say what."

I made a noise before I said, "Yes?"

"Better."

I groaned.

"Now I forgot what I was going to say," he said irritably.

"Hey, guess who I just saw?"

"I'm sure I have no idea."

"Alexandra Ralston," I teased him. "She said to give you her best."

"Uh-huh." He could not have sounded any more bored.

"So I'll see ya in the morning."

"Good. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay."

"All right. Good night."

I clicked off my phone and then entered the party in on the calendar on the touch screen on my phone. "You are the man to call, Jory," Michael teased me. "Put me on the guest list."

I smiled at him, and once I was done with my entry I asked Regina what she wanted me to do next. She wanted to show me her house, so I followed her through it.

We had a good time looking at old movie posters and I looked at scrapbooks and photo albums. I never tire of looking at other people's history, since I have none of my own.

Dinner was a loud undertaking with kids running all over, lots of talking that I thought bordered on arguing, and conversation about a thousand things I knew nothing about, like raising children and baseball. I concentrated on eating until the doorbell rang. We all looked up when Rachel returned in no time with an older couple and a younger woman. There was a loud yell from the table as both Thomas and Regina got up to greet them.

"Oh my goodness, look who it is." Michael beamed, getting up to go around the table.

I leaned in next to Jen. "Who're they?"

She put her arm around my shoulders and whispered to me. "The Gordons, they're old friends of my folks. Their daughter Nora and Sammy used to date back in high school. I had no idea she was back from California."

I nodded; feeling like the air was being sucked out of the room. "How long has she been gone?"

"I dunno, years."

"Why'd she leave?"

"She went to school out there."

I nodded, leaning back in my chair.

Sam stood up and Nora moved fast, coming around the table to fill his arms. She pressed herself in tight against him, her breasts crushed to his chest as she kissed his cheek and his jaw. He looked at me, directly into my eyes, and I turned all my attention to my food. I heard his rumbling laugh and felt my face get hot.

I was first up to help clear the table, but I went out the back door to stand around the side of the house instead of starting the dishes. It was cold outside in just my shirt and cardigan, but I needed the moment alone. Hard to sit and watch her put her hands all over him and do nothing. When I heard the yell from the kitchen, since I was under the window, I decided to go back in.

Sam was standing in the kitchen, yelling, while Michael held onto him. Nora was begging him to calm down while one of his other cousins stood on the other side of the room, with Levi holding onto him. Regina stood at the sink with Jen, who was pressing a paper towel to her nose. It was bleeding, and when the door swung open and Mitch came in, followed by Thomas, I saw him lunge toward the same guy Sam was yelling at.

"You drunk asshole!" he yelled as Thomas grabbed him, arm around his neck and another across his chest. "Get the hell outta here!"

"Oh fuck you, Mitchie, I could kill you, man. I didn't mean to fuckin' hit Jen, I meant to bitch-slap Michael, not her."

"I told you not to invite him," Michael yelled across the room. "But you never listen, Mom. Jesus Christ! You know he's a total deadbeat and you invite him anyway."

I saw her eyes fill as she held Jen's head back.

"Shut the fuck up," Sam yelled at Michael, shaking him off, striding across the floor toward the guy trying to twist out of Levi's grasp. "Mom wants to

help... let her fuckin' help. But we deal with this shit right now. This bullshit is gonna—"

"Sam!" Nora shouted at him. "Don't be such a mindless brute. We don't just beat people."

"Watch me," he said, shoving Levi off, grabbing the guy around the throat.

"Sam!" Thomas barked at him.

"Sam!" his mother yelled at him. "That's your cousin, leave him alone!"

"Hey," I called over to him.

He stopped and looked over his shoulder at me.

"You're gonna end some guy in your mom's kitchen?"

His eyes locked on mine.

"Maybe we just put him in a cab, huh?" I smiled at him.

You could hear a pin drop in the room. I saw the look on the guy's face, the terror there, knowing how close he was to being put on the floor.

"Fine," Sam growled, shoving the guy hard away from him before he went to check on his sister. "Call a cab, Mike."

His brother pulled out his cell phone and was on it seconds later. I leaned back against the door as everyone scrambled around the kitchen. When Regina moved Jen over to the small table in the kitchen to sit down, I took my place back at the sink to start the dinner cleanup.

"Hello."

I looked sideways and found Nora. "Hi."

"I didn't meet you yet."

"I'm Jory."

"Well, Jory, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance.

Usually when Sam's that mad we don't get him back. I remember once a guy cut us off in traffic, and he followed him all the way home—with me in the car no less—and beat the crap out of him."

I shrugged.

"How long have you and Sam been friends?"

"Not long," I told her as someone turned up the radio, and suddenly Jen was beside me. "Hey you," I smiled at her. "You all right?"

"I am now that Sammy didn't kill poor Charlie. It was an accident."

"I'm thinking he shouldn't have been trying to touch Mike either."

She chuckled and it sounded nasally from the blood in her nose. "True. Can I help you?"

"Only if you sing along with me."

She heard the beginnings of the Dionne Warwick song.

"Jory, we're both too young to know this song."

I started singing "Then Came You" and she laughed at me before she joined in, singing along with me at the top of her lungs. When I dried my hands on my jeans and held out my hand to her, she took it, and we were moving around the kitchen together. I saw Regina smiling and Thomas's deep breath as he calmed. I surrendered her to Mitch when the song changed and returned to my dishes. Rachel and Regina sang along with Aretha Franklin and me as they helped.

"Ooh, Jory, look at you move, honey," Rachel cooed, watching me dance next to the sink. "Somebody's missing out."

I arched a brow for her and she smacked my ass.

"Hey."

I turned at his voice; Sam was standing at the back door.

"Can you come here for a second?"

"Yeah," I said quickly. "Excuse me, ladies."

When I was within reach, he grabbed a handful of my sweater and pulled me close. "I wanna go now, okay?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Why?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Cause I just realized something."

"What's that?"

His jaw clenched. "I'm better at home."

"You are home."

"No, *our* home."

Our home? God, the things that came out of the man's mouth. "Okay."

He put his hand on the side of my neck and leaned his forehead against mine. "Thanks for keeping me grounded today. I have trouble when I'm here. My family expects me to be one way, and so I am."

I had no idea what that meant. His family wanted him to be a hothead? That made no sense.

"It's hard to be here sometimes."

I just took a deep breath, my eyes closing, enjoying his closeness and how he didn't seem to want to move away from me.

He bumped my jaw with his nose, tilting my head as he buried his face in the side of my neck, inhaling me. "You're definitely good for me."

I trembled because I couldn't help it. As he pulled back, he rubbed his cheek along mine. "I'll get your coat, all right?"

"Yessir."

"Say good-bye to my mom."

"Yessir."

"Knock it off. What time do I need to drop you off at work in the morning?"

I shook my head. "I can take the train, no worries."

"No, idiot. I will drive you so nobody kills you on your way to work. What time does your boss get in?"

"Eight."

He grunted.

"And tomorrow night he's got an event, so you're gonna hafta fend for yourself at dinner."

"Maybe I'll bring ya some food and eat with ya."

I scoffed. "Yeah, right."

His fingers threaded fast through my hair and he yanked me back to him, hard, his breath warm across my face. "You doubt me?"

I smiled wide, laughing softly. "No sir, Detective."

Another grunt before he shoved me away and left the room. I looked back at the two women and found them both staring openmouthed at me.

"What?"

"Jory," Regina breathed out. "Sam... he... oh... how long are you staying with Sam?"

"Just until the end of the court case, like I told you. Why?"

She nodded slowly and her mouth made a slow O as she dragged in a breath.

"What case?" Rachel asked her mother.

"I'll tell you later."

"Jory, honey, we all just love you," Regina said quickly and I smiled at her.

"Thank you."

Her eyes were absorbing me.

"I promise you it's usually not so eventful around here."

Rachel gave me a big fake smile, lying through her teeth.

I shrugged. "It's okay. Sometimes families fight, right? No big. But hey, I'm sorry I can't finish up the dishes, but Sam's ready to jet."

"Honey, you helped enough already," Regina said quietly.

"I was going to tell you to go sit down and watch some football with the men anyway."

"Like I didn't enjoy every minute of it." I grinned lazily. "I had a great time."

"Well, you fit in just perfect," she assured me. "So don't be a stranger."

I darted across the kitchen and hugged first Regina and then her daughter. "Thanks, guys."

Sam came back into the room and they both stared at him.

"What?" he asked irritably.

His mother just shook her head.

"Okay then," he said, leaning over to kiss her cheek and then Rachel's. "I'll see ya."

I took my coat as he held it out for me and reminded him that we needed to stop at the store on the way home because we needed cereal for the morning and Tide so I could finish the laundry.

"Whatever." He yawned, the exasperation not lost on me.

I glared at him and the smile I got back was huge.

"Jesus, you're a pain in the ass," he grumbled, shoving me out the back door in front of him.

As we walked around the side of the house, he draped an arm around my neck and pulled me tight against him.

"What're you doing?" I snapped at him, trying to push him off me.

"You were so jealous."

"What?"

"What?" He repeated. "You're so fulla shit. I saw the way you were lookin' at me and Nora."

"If I was looking at you in any one way, I can assure you it was entirely—"

His laughter cut me off, rumbling and deep.

"Screw you," I groused at him, trying to move away.

He wrapped both arms around my neck and leaned down to talk in my ear, his breath warm and his voice husky before he bit my earlobe gently. "J, it's so hot to see you all worked up. I promise to fuck all this worry right out of you as soon as we get home."

I shivered hard, leaning back against him, letting his hands run all over me.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," he said, kissing the side of my neck as I tipped my head to give him better access.

"Come with me."

We both heard the call from the front door as we got to the sidewalk.

"Sam!" his father called from the porch. "Nora needs a ride home. She's close to you."

"Like hell she is," I said under my breath, which made Sam smile wide. "Let her parents take her."

"Actually, I've got a lot of stops to make," he yelled back as Nora joined his dad outside.

"I can go along," Nora smiled at him. "Come on, Sammy!"

"You know what—" I began, but Sam suddenly grabbed me as he had the night before, throwing me over his shoulder and slapping my ass hard. The indignant gasp came out before I could stop it. "Put me down. You're gonna freak out your dad."

"Sorry," he yelled back. "Gotta go!"

When he turned I saw his dad laughing and the wave of relief nearly undid me. The man was clueless and that was good for me. Nora's expression was dark.

We were both silent in the car until I reached over and put my hand on his thigh. I felt the muscles tense under my hand and looked at his profile.

"It was harder than I thought, being there."

"Why?"

"I don't wanna go places where I can't touch ya if I want."

"You can do whatever you want, Sam, you just gotta tell people first so they expect it."

"Tell my folks I'm gonna be all over you. Yeah, that'll be the day."

"It might not be as bad as you think."

"No, it'll be worse."

"You'll hafta do it someday."

"Do what someday?"

"Tell your family you're gay."

"Why would I do that?"

The warning light went off in my head but I ignored it and ploughed on.

"Because when I'm still around in like two, three years, they're gonna start to get suspicious."

He chuckled. "Who says you will be?"

I went to move my hand but he covered it with his, holding it in place, his fingers sliding between mine. "Don't get all defensive, just hear me out. I'm a cop, for starters. If I'm gay, I might as well quit right now. It's not even possible for any of the guys I know to ever get past it. And my folks, my family—are you kidding? There's no way. Did you see how excited my mom got when Nora came over? She wants me married with kids, not screwing around with you."

"So that's it. Just like I said before." I yanked free of his grip and plastered myself against my door. "Once the case is over, I'm outta your house and your life."

"Well, yeah... what'd you think?"

I had thought all kinds of ridiculous things. I had been thinking forever because I had fallen for him so fast. I was ready to wrap my life around his.

"J?"

I could stick around and try to win him over, try to make him love me so much that he could never let me go. He would get a new and better job, his parents would completely change their perspective and want me for their son, and all his friends would be crazy about me. We would live happily ever after. And as soon as I thought it I realized how insane it was. I was the one who was an idiot, not him. He couldn't change; I was the only one who could.

"Hey," he said softly and I looked at him. "You weren't thinking I was gonna—"

"No." I cleared my throat, looking at the dashboard through swimming eyes. "I was just being stupid."

"Cause I never told you this was gonna be a forever thing, J."

"No, you didn't."

"I want to have kids. I want exactly what my folks have. I just gotta find the right girl."

A girl with a dick, I thought but didn't say it. "Sure."

He laughed at me. "But you don't care. You're not serious here either. I've seen your phone—there are more guys calling than my sisters ever had all put together."

"Right."

"You just wanna have fun."

"Sure."

"Just like I said, though—while you're in my house, I'm the only one, you understand?"

I heard it loud and clear. When the experiment was over I would go on my way and he would go back to sleeping with girls, auditioning the mother of his children. I was an interlude, intermission—all the *I* words applied here. Even if I made myself seemingly indispensable, even if I thought he could not live without me—in the end he *would* live without me because it was not what he wanted. His heart was not connected to his dick. He could sleep with me from now until he died and still not love me because he was not hardwired that way. Men loved women, not other men. This was a truth like any other for him. Rain fell, the sun shone, men loved women. Period. I was wasting my time thinking it could ever be anything more....

When his phone rang and he was on it all the way to the grocery store, he let me go in alone. I didn't even care, but I got what we needed and came out. He told me how sorry he was but he had to go to work. There were some things he had to do, no way out of it. He'd drop me at home and be back as soon as he could.

"I'll put you up against the wall when I get home, J." He smiled at me, his hand on my throat.

And I shivered because it was suddenly just sex with nothing attached. I felt hollow inside, and as he drove away, I watched the SUV for as long as I could, letting it get smaller and smaller until he turned the corner and disappeared. When I was ready, I took a deep breath and went upstairs to pack. I called my boss on the way up.

Chapter Thirteen

A year ago when my boss had to drop me at my place one night, I had invited him in. He walked around my apartment and in the minute and a half that it took him he had nodded several times. When he was done, he faced me and asked when I wanted to move out. I had frowned at him as he explained that he owned a place downtown near Rush Street, very small at five hundred square feet, in an old brick building with all original molding.

It was a tiny apartment, but clean and very tastefully furnished. The windows could be opened wide and without screens you could lean out into the sky and listen to the music from the jazz piano bar across the street. In the summer there was only the moist breeze through the windows and in the winter just one radiator in the whole place. He told me to wear socks and I'd be fine.

The building had an outer door that a resident needed a key for or a visitor could be buzzed through. The inner door locked automatically, and you either stepped instantly to the apartment door to the right or went up the five stairs to the second floor. I would be on the fourth, and when I called my boss from the cab after gathering all my possessions from Sam's place, I asked him if he still owned it. He did. I then asked if anyone was living in it. No one was. I asked if I could and he said yes, very fast. He told me that he would send movers to my old place in Oak Park first thing the following morning to get my mattress and box spring. I would have to sleep on the couch the first night. He would meet me there in a half an hour to give me the keys.

"Don't you even want to know why I'm finally taking you up on your offer?"

"I don't care. I just want you out of the hovel you currently live in."

"You never said how much you hated it."

"It wasn't my place to let my sentiments be known... until now."

I sighed. "Listen, I don't want charity, boss. I can hire my own movers."

"No, you can't," he assured me. "My movers will clean up your place so you can get your deposit back after they bring over your bed. Do you have anything else left over there at all?"

"Some cottage cheese that used to be milk in the fridge and a few granola bars."

"That's not what I meant."

"I have a lava lamp."

He ignored my comment. "You have your laptop and all your clothes?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll see you in a few minutes. Wait for me on the front stoop."

He was in his Sunday afternoon clothes, cashmere trench coat and a charcoal suit with a navy polo underneath; his boots clipped the pavement as he walked toward me.

"Sorry," I called over to him.

I got just barely a smile, the curl of his lip at the corner.

"You exhaust me," he said softly, the voice husky and deep.

"But I seem to enjoy it."

I smiled as my phone rang and I saw Sam's number flash on my display.

"Shall I?" he asked me, holding out his hand.

I traded him my phone for the keys.

"Detective Kage," he said curtly. "This is Dane Harcourt, Jory's boss. Yes, very well, thank you. Uh-huh, yes... yes, he is. No, I don't think that will be necessary. I have decided that I can't, in good conscience, have Jory stay with you a moment longer. It would be too great a burden for you, as your lifestyles are nothing alike. So I've moved him into an apartment of mine that I can assure you is very secure and quite tucked away. He'll be safe there and safe at work, so you give us a call when you're ready for him to show up at court." He listened a moment. "Sorry? Oh no-no, it's no trouble at all. I mean, let's be blunt, once the trial is over you would have been sending him back home anyway. This way he can move now and get settled into a new life, a new routine. I mean, you didn't really want to be saddled with him anyway, did you?"

I waited, straining to hear.

"There, see, I didn't think so," he said nonchalantly.

"Please do call me, Detective when you need him." One perfectly shaped brow arched elegantly. "Because, unlike you, I have a vested interest in his welfare. I can't get along without him." He finished with a deep rumbling chuckle.

"Thank you, Detective, you too," he said as he hung up, smiling at me.

"What?"

"Nothing," he grunted. "Now listen to me. There's a bodega at the end of the street to your right and a Cuban place across the street from here. To your left is a fairly good Chinese restaurant and an exceptionally good record store that still sells vinyl."

"Thanks, boss, I'm sure walking around at night in this neighborhood will be fun."

"Indeed."

"We haven't even talked about the rent yet."

"I'm not worried about it, Jory. I know where you work."

I smiled at him and he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed tight.
"Just rest. Watch some TV, go get some Cuban food... relax. Sit in the window and freeze. Whatever you want."

I nodded and he lifted his hand to put it down on my shoulder.

"We'll get you all moved in the morning."

"Yessir."

"Get some rest. You're going to be up late tomorrow."

I nodded and he squeezed my shoulder gently before he turned and left the apartment. I locked the door behind him and found I instantly liked the feel of the place. It was immaculately clean, didn't have the cramped oppressiveness of my old apartment simply because of the layout, and when I opened the windows, the cool breeze blew through the room.

I liked the wooden floors, the overstuffed burlap couch, and the tiny kitchenette. My dishes would arrive the following day, but in the meantime I would use the circa 1972 set that my boss had left me. It sort of went along with everything else.

Outside there were the noises of the night, people on the street, cars going by, the jazz trumpet, and my neighbors coming and going. It was all very comforting as I sat there and cried over Sam Kage. My heart was breaking, and the fact that he didn't call back told me that my drama was too much for him, and by leaving I had made a decision final for him. Logically it was for the best, but I would miss the presence of him, his strength and dominance. I went and lay down on the couch. I didn't get back up.

* * * *

In college I had to take a fitness class as one of my requirements, and one of the things we learned was that your body doesn't know the difference

between physical pain and emotional pain. That's why grief, if left unchecked, can eventually kill you. People who are grieving complain that their whole bodies hurt. I never second-guess them, I take that as the truth and do what I can to get them some food or help clean their house. The way I dragged around for the entire week, Jill and Celia finally told me to have a funeral for my dead love life and move on. I told them we could go out drinking instead. They were game and we took Piper and hit the Pink Cadillac after work on Friday. After that I took everyone back to my new digs and they oohed and aahed over how cute it was inside. We were going to have dinner at the Cuban place and were having more drinks at home before we left. All I had was vodka, so I mixed it with cranberry juice and Sprite.

"How was Dane's dinner party on Monday?" Piper giggled around the lip of her glass.

"Oh screw you," I groaned, sitting down between Jill and Celia, both of them instantly touching me, hands on my shoulder, hands on my thighs.

"I heard it was awesome," Jill chimed in. "But you were there until like two in the morning, weren't you?"

"Yeah," I said quickly, nodding, which sent them all into peals of laughter.

My boss had fifteen people for dinner and I had it catered at the very last minute. It went off flawlessly but only because I stood in the kitchen and went in and out, checking, making sure the drinks were served and the appetizers, then the meal, dessert, coffee, and finally nightcaps. I hooked my iPod up to his stereo and played jazz all night and had the tables decorated with roses from my favorite florist, who always came through for me. The e-mails and thank-you notes gushed over an elegant, intimate evening that had been enjoyed by all. I had received my usual "well done" in the manner of a brief nod. He never said thank you, he just hired movers and made sure I had a safe place to live. It was like, I never got a birthday present, but out of the blue, for no reason, he had given me my iPhone, and

on another occasion told me to take the company card and buy new clothes. It was how he worked.

Dane made my new rent seven-fifty a month, and even when I argued that such a number was insanity, he just gave me a look like I had passed annoying days ago. Since I was being given a gift, I shut up and accepted his generosity. I had ridden with him to the airport and he had promised to call when he returned on Sunday. I nodded and when he was ready to get out of the car, he did what he always did and put a hand on the back of my neck and squeezed tight.

"I'll be back. Don't fret."

I had squinted at him and the chuckle in return was deep.

"Jory, the music is awesome," Celia said suddenly, bringing me back to the present. "Do you get serenaded like this every night?"

I smiled at her and nodded.

"Lucky."

"Let's go eat." Jill yawned loudly. "I'm hungry and I wanna play some pool after."

The walk down the street in the crisp night air was very soothing and Piper's arm in mine felt comfortable and welcome. All three of these women genuinely cared for me and it was relaxing being around them. Later, when we were playing stripes versus solids at the pool hall, Celia finished off her Bloody Mary and looked at me hard.

"What?"

"Thanksgiving is next Thursday. What are you doing this year?"

I bent over the table to take my shot. "I dunno."

"Why don't you come to my mom's with me and Angel? He can use the buffer."

Her mother and her husband went at it every year. "I dunno... she tears him up."

"It's because she doesn't think online poker is a real job."

I agreed, but I would never tell her that. "I know, sweetie."

I think I'm gonna pass."

She shrugged. "Fine, then Jilly gets you, since Piper had you last year."

"I'm not five, ya know," I assured her, smiling as I polished off my third mojito.

"You better slow down." Piper chuckled, massaging my shoulders. "Or we'll be carrying you out of here."

"Not that I would mind," Jill grinned suggestively. "You know my feelings, J. You just haven't been in bed with the right woman yet."

I sighed and held open my arms to her. "Come gimme a hug."

"Oh yeah, don't mind if I do," she giggled, moving fast to grab me tight.

It was funny but the three of them were all over me, leaning on me, touching me, hugging me, patting my ass, running their fingers through my hair, smoothing fingertips over my eyebrows, my cheeks, down my nose. Always it was like this, the physical attention that was flattering and somehow just sweet. I was adored and it was obvious to anyone that looked at us. As I stood leaning on the bar, having been sent for the fifth round since the waitress was

"too damned slow," I saw Nick on the other side of the room.

I was a little tipsy or I would have never gone over.

He was playing foosball with a woman and two other guys and even though I was sure he could see me, he didn't acknowledge me even when I was right beside the table.

"Hey, Nick." I smiled wide, happy to see him.

No answer.

I glanced around at the others but only the woman's eyes flicked to mine.

"Hi."

"Hi." She gave me just a trace of smile.

I looked back at Nick's face, realizing what, if I had been sober, I would have understood quicker. I was purposely being ignored. He was seemingly absorbed in the ball on the table and couldn't be bothered to give me the time of day.

"Are you even gonna say hello?"

"Sure." He looked up and his eyes were flat and cold, his tone icy. "What can I do for you?"

It was my fault. He had been open and honest the last time we had spoken and I had blown him off as I had submerged under the wave that was Detective Kage. Basically I was getting a little karmic retaliation. I had been shitty to him, Sam had dumped me, and so I had basically reaped what I had sown. Big fat circle of cause and effect that I deserved.

"Nothing," I said softly, hands in my pockets. "Sorry."

When I got back to the girls I asked them if they wanted to hit the movies with me. They just stared at me until I volunteered to buy popcorn and M&Ms. That got everybody moving.

On the way out I got my second dose of fun when a hand grabbed me by the back of my shirt and I was suddenly face-to-face with Detective Kage. I

stood there, frozen, even though he had let me go, and watched him walk away with his buddies in a big, loud group, hand in hand with a beautiful blonde.

"You look like a hustler dressed like that," he had said under his breath as he passed.

I had thought different. I didn't think jeans, wingtips, and a brown dress shirt open at the collar said rent boy. But maybe there was just something about me that looked cheap? As I watched him make his way to the bar, saw him do the guy clenches and handshaking with the men he was meeting, I felt my heart in my throat. I could barely breathe seeing him make the crude gestures with the others over his date. Like she was hot and he was going to tap that later. I was going to be sick.

Jill grabbed my hand and yanked me outside to get some air. They all wanted to know who Sam was and what he had said. I explained that it was much too long a story to go into before a movie. When I got the look from Celia, I understood that they could have cared less about anything at that moment but hearing me dish some dirt.

We ended up going to the jazz club across the street from my new apartment and I explained all about Detective Kage, leaving out the part about people trying to kill me. Only Dane knew that piece of the puzzle. They sat and listened to me until two in the morning, at which time we adjourned to a mom and pop diner around the corner where we had breakfast. Piper said she hadn't been out so late since college. When Celia asked her what it had been like in the seventies she got smacked really hard on the arm. I laughed so hard milk came out of my nose.

After I put them all in a cab I staggered up the steps to my apartment and passed out on the couch. I didn't leave again until Sunday night. Between the icy rain, the *Real World* marathon, and *VH1* counting down everything from Worst Love Songs to Best Rocker Hair, I had no reason to go anywhere. I had enough food; I had tea, both iced and hot, and lots of water. Since I felt like sludge, I hit the gym late Sunday night and ran five miles

until I was exhausted. Under the hot water I felt the funk start to recede. By the time I was out I was more like me than I had been in over a week.

Stupid to give anyone power to make me feel one way or another—except my boss. Only Dane Harcourt got to yank my chain.

Chapter Fourteen

I sat in the chair across from Dane and waited. I hoped that my look conveyed how annoyed I was.

"What?" he finally asked, and I could hear the irritation.

"Are you going to tell me or do you want me to beg?"

"Beg."

"I don't wanna," I snapped, pushing out my chair and throwing the files that I had in my lap onto his desk. Since he had walked in the door he had been an ass. I had greeted him and all I got was a grunt. I had been bouncing off the walls to hear about his trip and he was giving me the silent treatment for whatever reason. I wasn't going to sit there and take it a second longer, as I could barely keep from yelling.

"Don't you dare get up!" he ordered me sharply.

"Or what?" I snapped back.

"Or don't ever come back."

I was stunned. "You're gonna fire me?"

"Yes," he said in a low-voiced growl

"Huh."

I considered what he'd said. I sat there, not moving, thinking through my options, and though telling him to go to hell was tempting, I instead scooted back in. A moment of bravado would kill our friendship for all time. It wasn't worth it. The fact that he was counting on me to back down so he could save face was annoying beyond words, but this was my role. I was the one who gave in; he was the one who pressed.

So I replaced the files in my lap and looked over at him. His eyes were like pieces of ice, so cold, so clear.

"Okay, so I'll wait 'til you're ready."

"And if that's never?"

God, he was really hoping for a knock-down-drag-out fight, and I had no idea why. "Then it's never," I said simply, shrugging for emphasis.

"Whatever you want."

Dark eyes just stared at me.

He was so flawed. "What happened?"

"I need you to call Glenn Upton for me."

My sigh could be heard out in the lobby and he was glaring at me after that.

"You have a problem?"

I rolled my eyes dramatically. "No sir. What shall I ask Mr.

Upton?"

He stared at me a long moment.

"Well?" I prompted him.

"Nothing. Go back to your desk."

So I did as I was told and sat there across from Joanna Belian, our new typist. She was very nice, easily in her late sixties, and had brought along some lovely pictures of her grandchildren.

"Is it Jordan?" she asked me after a moment.

"It's Jory." I smiled back, correcting her gently.

"Your boss is quite a looker, even though he's got ice around the edges."

"Does he?"

"Oh yes, dear," she smiled at me. "Cold is the word I'd use."

"I think he's just—" I began, but when the office door opened and he leaned out of the doorway I went mute.

"Do you want to know what happened or not?" he asked me irritably.

I threw up my hands. "I have no idea what you even want me to say at this point."

He gestured for me and I got up and went into his office.

When I turned around he walked over to the leather couch and flopped down on it. I couldn't help scowling.

"What?"

"You're being so weird."

"Am I?"

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Whatever," I said dismissively.

He looked up at me for a long minute. "Awfully confident today."

"Were you serious before? Do you really want me to beg?"

He sighed before leaning forward, head in his hands. "All right, so I took a cab from the airport to their place in Mesquite, and the house is huge. I

don't know what I was thinking but for some reason I imagined them poor."
He grinned suddenly. "Go ahead."

"What?"

"You have questions already."

"No-no-no." I waved my hand dismissively, grabbing the chair I'd been sitting in earlier, putting it down in front of him so I could sit. "G'head."

He nodded. "Well, so I go to the door and Caleb Reid is there and he invites me in. I dump everything in the foyer and—what?" he grumbled at me.

"What?" I looked at him hard.

"You smiled."

"I smiled?"

"You smiled. What?"

"What?"

"Why are you smiling?"

"I can't smile?"

"Just, what... why are you smiling?"

I smiled at him again. "You said foyer. You're the only person I know who would use the word foyer when they were telling a story."

"Oh for crissakes," he groaned. "Try and focus for once."

"Yeah... sorry, go on, go on."

Quick breath. "All right, so I drop my stuff and then I walk into the living room and she's right there, sitting on the couch. There's no adjustment time

or announcement—I'm just suddenly face-to-face with my birth mother."

"Oh shit."

"Well said."

"What did she say?"

"She said hello."

"And, go on, you're killing me here."

"She wanted me to sit by her on the couch and I did. I didn't want to hold her hand but I could tell she did, so I did."

I actually thought, what would Jory do if he were here?" He smiled suddenly, and his eyes were soft.

And at that moment, with the weight of his gaze on me, I got it. In my life he was the constant. Everything else changed but Dane Harcourt remained. When I had been glib the night at the police station, wished them good luck finding anyone I loved, they needed to look no further than my boss.

I admired the man, I was devoted to him and his welfare, and I just plain old loved him. Not lust—I didn't want to sleep with him. He was like the big brother I never had and had always wanted. He was my family.

"What's wrong with you?"

I shook my head.

"So should I keep going?"

"Yeah, yeah, go-go."

"Okay." He sighed deeply. "Well I held her hand and she starts telling me how much she didn't want to give me up and blah-blah-blah—"

"Boss!"

"What? It's the truth. I sort of tuned out. I mean, I didn't do it intentionally but I shut off the listening because I realized that I really, truly don't care."

"How'dya mean?"

"I mean, what is she going to say? What do I want her to say? What does it matter? My parents are my parents. She gave birth to me but it doesn't make her my mother."

I nodded. "That's right."

"I was polite, I listened to what she said and I did the right thing and told her that none of it mattered and that everything turned out all right."

"Did you meet your father too?"

"I did. He looked terrible."

"I feel real sorry for him. He didn't even get a say in whether to keep you or not."

"No, he didn't."

"What did he say?"

"Something very similar to what you just said actually."

"Huh."

"He wants to come here and visit me."

"Oh. That's interesting. What'd you say?"

"I said we would see."

"Do you look like him?"

"Yes."

"He must be gorgeous."

I realized after I'd said it that it sounded like I was coming onto him.

He looked at me hard. "I didn't notice."

"So what else?"

Flashing smile then, eyes firing as he spoke. "Are you embarrassed?"

"Can you just go on before I kill you?"

"Not very friendly."

"Go on," I snapped at him.

"We talked some more and I told them both that if there was anything I could do for either of them that they should not hesitate to call me."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Did you stay for dinner?"

"I didn't, no."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Since when do you ask me?"

"Okay, that's fair." I nodded. "Why didn't you ask your mother why she gave you up?"

"It hardly matters now."

"I think it matters to you."

"I think it matters to you," he said mockingly. "You seem to always believe that you know what's best for me in every instance."

"Better than you," I muttered under my breath.

"Pardon me."

"Nothing."

"Jory."

I crossed my arms and looked over at him with what I hoped was scorn.

"What? Speak," he commanded.

"I think I know what you should do."

"When?"

"Now."

"And what is that?"

"You need to go back and ask all your questions in case you end up not seeing them again."

"I won't see them again."

"Crap."

"So you see, I won't be asking any more questions."

"We could go back."

"Why, so you can take notes?"

It wasn't a bad idea. "The sarcasm is not lost on me."

We were silent for several minutes. "Look at me," he finally said.

"I am looking at you."

"No, look at me."

I looked into the dark gray eyes of my boss, saw the flecks of silver like always. "What am I looking for?"

"Do you truly believe that this can mean anything anymore?"

"Maybe."

"Jory, are we friends?"

I looked at him really hard, into the face I knew so well, and saw what I always saw, the absolute rock-like resolve.

His strength, that I could always depend on, the reason other people were always so drawn to him, because of that strength. He was unmovable. He could be battered, but never broken. It was not often you met people who were unbreakable. It was almost a regal bearing he had, like he should have been a king. Someone you could surrender up your life to, an almost heroic quality. And so, because I didn't want him to think I was weak, I found my voice and answered him. "Yes, we're friends."

"Good." He smiled warmly. "I'm glad."

I studied him. "You want me to work for you forever, don't you?"

The smile made his eyes shiny. "Forever. Such a timetable you choose."

"I need to take care of you." I said it because I felt suddenly brave and because I was feeling vulnerable and because I could. He was the only thing I could point to and say was mine in my life. My boss. I was possessive to a fault.

If he was going to belong to me, then he had to say the words. "May I?"

He nodded.

It wasn't enough. "That's a yes?" I prodded, wanting to be sure. Wanting him to make this finally solid between us. We had been dancing around it for so long, the commitment of friendship. He needed to make a choice, right then and there.

To either give me the room I needed to maneuver in his life or back away. Truly his friend, able to speak my mind whenever I wanted to on any topic, from his love life to where he worked, to his family, to his friends, to the tie he chose in the morning. He was agreeing to give me a voice in his life and I would be able to weigh in and be counted. And God help him if he agreed because every woman that wanted him from that point on was going to be dealing with me up close and personal. The scrutiny would be unfathomable. "Say it."

"What are you, twelve?"

"Say it," I said menacingly. "Say it."

"You're threatening me?"

"I will soon."

"Jory, you—"

"Say it!" I demanded. I was going to kill him any second.

"That's a yes."

I caught my breath. I was absolutely stunned. "Really?" I couldn't believe it.

"Yes."

"You're positive?"

"I'm positive."

"Why?"

"Just because."

"And so I get to—"

"You get to." He cut me off, sighing heavily. He looked worn out.

"I'm so happy!"

"I know," he chuckled tiredly. "I can tell."

I couldn't contain myself. I smiled so wide. "I can't get fired anymore?"

"No."

"Not that I could have before," I clarified, looking at him hard, daring him to contradict me.

"Not that you could have before," he agreed, smiling in defeat, shaking his head. "Christ."

"You know I love you." I blurted out before I even thought about it.

He looked at me hard.

I held my breath. I had gone and pushed right over the edge, as was my way.

After a minute he said, "I know."

The look I was getting was pure annoyance, and as I watched him scowl at me I had an epiphany. Big word for a simple thing but it takes me longer than other people to reach the same place. "You," I couldn't bring myself to say the word so I substituted an easier one, "you like me too, huh?"

"Yes."

"You're compelled against your better judgment to take care of me."

"Yes."

Like I was his brother. "I'm very lucky."

"Yes, you are."

A thought crossed my mind. "Can we drink our lunch at Boca? I feel like celebrating."

"Fine."

"Cool." I beamed at him, so very pleased.

"Let's go now." He yawned loudly.

"Wait." I had thought of something else. "Are you going back to Texas?"

"I don't know."

"Do they want you to go back?"

"Of course."

"Do you want to?"

"No."

"But you should."

"Why should I?"

"Are we okay?" I asked suddenly, checking to make sure.

"We're okay."

"And so what about your new family?" I sighed, so relieved that we were over and beginning at the same time. "You have new brothers and sisters."

"It was for her," he said, getting up and crossing the room to his desk, to the chair to retrieve his suit jacket. "After this time there is nothing more I can offer. It's futile to even pursue."

"But—"

"Jory, think—different lives are led, to dissolve into what, cards at Christmas? I have that now if I do nothing more.

How many people do you want to have to shop for?" He smiled at me, one dark eyebrow arched in a question.

"But they are your family."

"I had a family before my parents died. I don't need more."

"Will you regret it later?"

"I don't think so."

"Maybe we'll go back."

"No."

"No?"

"You are part of my life, same as my other friends that I don't share with just anyone."

Oooh, I was grouped with the important people! "So that's why I didn't go."

"That's why."

I nodded. "That was a nice thing to say."

"I have my moments."

* * * *

Dane and I had such a good lunch that afterward he dumped me at home and told me that he would see me the following morning. When he shoved me out of the cab, I stood on the sidewalk waving like an idiot for several minutes.

Still buoyant four hours later, I accepted my friend Andy's invitation to hit the club with him and a whole big group of people. And I almost wished I would run into Sam Kage the way I looked, because this way he could see what dressing to get laid really looked like.

The black jeans hugged my legs and ass like a second skin, hanging low on my hips, and the silk shirt was open to my abs. I decided on my way out the door that anybody who wanted to put their hands on me was free to do so. When one of Andy's friends groped me in the car, I let him. He smiled and pressed himself into me.

"Andy, Jory's open for business."

"If he is," he said, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Then I've got first dibs."

But when the car stopped in front of the club, I spilled out and went inside with the yelling, cajoling, and calling behind me. I wasted no time in pushing into the crowd and losing myself. I could hear the thump of the trance music inside my body as I danced. They were playing vintage tracks and I closed my eyes and moved. It was like drowning in sound.

I had many partners but nobody could get me off the floor, so they lost interest. Even as ready for a trick as I was, there was no bathroom action for me. Screwing in a stall while other people peed had never been my idea of a good time. So I stayed and danced until Andy came and dragged me off the floor, with strong arms wrapped around my chest. I gulped down copious amounts of ice water even though he tried to get more alcohol in me. Still on cloud nine from my talk with Dane, when I saw Nick sitting at a table near the back with some of his friends, I decided that I would give it one more try. It was almost Thanksgiving after all.

All eyes on the table rose to me until Nick noticed that the focus was behind him and turned. His gaze came up from the floor to my face very slowly. I smiled wide for him and I watched his jaw clench.

"Hey. Can I talk to you?"

He stood up and put a hand flat on my chest before he shoved me back.
"Get lost, Jory."

"Nick," I said, reaching for him. "Please, just c'mere for—"

"What? You wanna say sorry for the way you treated me?"

He shrugged. "Like it matters? Like you didn't do me a huge favor. I mean, for shit's sake, Jory, what the fuck was I thinking? I'm going to be a doctor and you're just some trick I picked up at a club. You're the fuck and forget kind, not the forever kind."

"Nick—"

"You've got one-night stand written all over you."

One last try, because I owed him. In karma, I owed him.

"Nicky, please let me

just—"

"What? You want me to fuck you?" The whole table laughed at once, and I got that everybody else knew that I'd treated him badly as well. They were enjoying me begging him, trying to apologize, and getting just what I deserved instead. Payback was a bitch and he was giving it to me with both barrels. I was in for embarrassment and humiliation galore. "Let's go to the bathroom, Jory, I'll tap that right now for you."

I just looked at him.

"No? You wanna take me back to your place, Jory?"

I remained silent.

"It's a shithole, but you're trash so it makes sense. How many guys you have through there a night? Five? Ten?"

I nodded. "Okay."

"Okay what? You wanna go to your place?"

I shook my head.

"Well you're not coming home with me. I'd have to burn my sheets afterward."

I took the steadying breath, took a few steps backward, then pivoted around and left. And it was weird but I almost felt better. I had let him hurt me, give me all the venom he had, and then said nothing and walked away. It was somehow cleansing. My debt was paid. But I couldn't stay.

Getting your head handed to you is a buzzkill no matter what.

When I ducked outside I realized how cold it was. I needed a jacket or a cab right away. I shoved my hands in my pockets and started down the street. After a couple of minutes I realized something was moving, out of the corner of my eye. I am not trained in the art of stalking, as in how to do it or how not to let on when someone is doing it to you. So I stopped and turned to look at the street. The van did the same, coming to a stop, and as the side door flew open, I bolted. I heard the firecracker pop close to me and ran down the alley to my right; I heard the revving engine and was up and over the six-foot chain-link fence in seconds flat. Give it up for the gym.

I ran on, never once looking back, having seen way too many horror movies where the hero got it like that. The rusted dumpster I ducked around got hit and the reverberation of metal hitting metal panicked me. When I was on the next street, I heard screeching tires as I went up and over cars stopped at the light, nearly got hit by another car that ran the red, and ran flat-out when

I got across. The only thought I had was that I had to lead whoever it was as far away from my apartment as possible.

The stairs leading up to the subway were there suddenly, and as I ran I heard the engine. Too close to get up to the platform and I was getting dangerously close to my neighborhood. I swerved sharply and heard the crunch of metal. I instantly reversed and started back for the club. I could feel my lungs starting to hurt even as I pushed and felt the kick of speed. Again, let's hear it for the stair climber and hundreds of laps in the pool. Funny the things that go through your head when you're running for your life.

It was hilarious, or it would have been, but when I came careening around the corner I saw Nick and his friends coming out of the club. I went around the parked cars into the street so I wouldn't run past him and his group. I stopped suddenly and the van blew by as I looked around.

"Jory!" Nick yelled at me, and when our eyes met I registered the fear there before I checked the van. It swung around and I bolted across the street. I heard the tires and more firecracker pops before I flew down another alley. I saw a dumpster and above it the roof ladder.

Adrenaline is amazing. I felt like Spiderman or something.

I got up on the closed dumpster, leaped for the rung, and did the chin-up to the second one. Once my legs were under me I got up fast as the van came to a screeching stop beneath me.

Not that I looked down, I just heard it. I heard the yelling and then there were sparks in front of my face, on all sides, as I climbed. Pure luck, but only in the movies could one moving target hit another. I fell over onto the roof of the apartment building and lay there for a minute trying to breathe, trying to get my heart and lungs not to explode. I pulled out my phone and dialed the police precinct. I asked not for Sam but for his partner, Dominic Kairov. I sat there as I was forwarded.

"Mr. Keyes?"

"Detective Kairov?"

"Yes, what's—"

But I cut him off, told him where I was, what had happened, and asked if maybe he could send like a squad car or something to scare the van off.

"Where are you ri—"

"Jory!"

I groaned as Sam's voice came over the line. I hung up and peeked over the side to the street below. No van. I was going to go to the roof door when it was thrown open and two guys came through. They both had guns drawn. Shit. I scrambled over the side and lucky for me they were more than a hundred fifty feet away. I was down the ladder faster than I had come up, dropped the few feet to the lid of another dumpster and rolled off to the pavement. I was on my feet as the wall beside me exploded before I took the corner. I ran down the sidewalk as fast as I could, crossed two streets, and hailed a cab. Once inside, I directed the driver back to my apartment. I ducked down in the back and saw the van fly out into the middle of the street and blow by us going in the opposite direction. I sat up and put my head back and closed my eyes. I tried to catch my breath.

"You all right, man?"

I exhaled long and loud. "Perfect."

Maybe I could skip the gym the following day.

Once I was inside the outer door at my new place I felt completely safe. Nobody knew I'd moved, and when I was under the hot water ten minutes later, I concentrated on not passing out. When adrenaline leaves, it just sort of deserts you in a hurry. I managed to change into my flannel pajama bottoms and hit the bed instead of the floor when I passed out.

* * * *

The pounding on the door woke me, and when I looked at the clock in the kitchen as I shuffled to the front door, it was two-thirty in the morning.

"Jory!"

I winced. Even his voice through the door sounded like a hammer. When I cracked the door I left the chain on and peered out. "Yes, Detective?" I yawned loudly. "What can I do for you?"

"Open this goddamn door right fucking now!"

The volume was seriously too much for the hour. "I have neighbors," I reminded him as I closed the door to unchain it.

"Could you keep it down, please?"

When I turned he stormed in, slamming the door behind him and grabbing me in one swift motion. He had a hand fisted in my hair and the other on my throat as he stared down into my eyes. I was still half asleep so my body was much more pliable then it would have usually been. I was boneless.

"You stupid sonofabitch," he growled at me, his mouth hovering over mine.

I squirmed free of his grasp and crossed the room, putting the couch between us. "Whaddya want?"

"You're going into protective custody right fuckin' now."

His voice was hard and cold.

"No." I shook my head. "I'm not."

"If I can find you, believe me, they can find you."

"Please, you know who my boss is—they don't. I'm not worried. Besides, if they kill me, maybe you can catch 'em in the act. That would make you really happy."

"Jory—"

"Just go away," I pleaded. "Please. I'll do anything."

He stared at me a long minute before he spun around, stalked to the door, threw it open so hard that it vibrated, and walked out. I was going to clap because it was so dramatic, but I thought better of it. What if he heard me?

Bearbaiting was stupid after all. As I replaced the chain and dead bolted the lock, I was hoping I was all done with drama for one night.

* * * *

End of Book One

A Matter of Time: Vol. 1

by Mary Calmes

Book Two

Chapter One

I was getting back from having lunch with my friend Tran, who worked on the fourth in the same building as me, when my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number, so I answered figuring maybe it was Dane Harcourt, my boss and the one constant in my life.

"Hello?"

"Jory?"

It was Nick Sullivan, the doctor who couldn't decide if he loved me or hated me. "Hi."

He cleared his throat. "Are you all right? I saw you running last night and I —"

"You're only calling now?" I chuckled. "I could've been killed." And I was being funny, keeping things light, but I had been running from men who wanted me dead the night before. The night before it had been anything but funny.

"I—no, I called the police last night but you were already gone by the time they showed up and—"

I smiled into the phone. "It's fine. I'm fine."

There was a brief silence. "I was a total dick last night, as well as the time I saw you before, and I'm so sorry."

Last night, before I had been running for my life, I had allowed Nick Sullivan to serve me up a dish of just desserts.

Weeks before he had confessed to being crazy about me, but that was right before I had become an unwilling witness to murder. My life had turned upside down, which had less to do with a contract being put out on my life

and more to do with one of the detectives on the case, Sam Kage. I had fallen so hard and so fast for Detective Kage that everything and everyone else in my life had been forgotten, especially Dr. Nick Sullivan, who had never been anything special to begin with. He would make someone a great partner someday, but he would never be mine. When we had crossed paths at a club, I felt that I should try and apologize for disappearing after he had confessed his interest in me. The venom I got back had been surprising.

"Jory?"

"Sorry," I said quickly.

"I really am sorry."

"It's okay, I deserved it all, so we're good." I had dated him and forgotten him and that was mean. In my defense, there had never been a drop of chemistry or even a spark of attraction.

"Are we?"

"Yep."

He coughed softly. "Okay."

"Okay," I said softly. "I'll see ya around." And I didn't give him time to say anything more. I just hung up.

"Excuse me."

When I looked up, the man standing there smiled wide before he thrust out his hand.

"Hello there, son. Truman Ward here for my one o'clock with your boss, Mr. Harcourt."

Being Dane Harcourt's assistant and actually being good at my job, I knew that the smiling man was not in the right place on the right day. I squinted at him. "I believe you're two days early, sir." I smiled slowly, shaking the

offered hand. "You were scheduled for the day after Thanksgiving, not the day before."

His eyebrows furrowed. "Crap, was that what my secretary was trying to tell me this morning before I left?"

"Monica?" I dredged the name from my memory.

"Yes." his face brightened. "That's right."

"Yeah, we talked yesterday," I informed him. "It's Friday, sir, at this same time."

"Well, hell," he grunted, taking a seat in the chair closest to my desk. "Well, Friday ain't gonna work—I'll be in D.C."

Could ya give the big man a call and see if maybe he might spare some time today? I just have a few things to talk to him about, some changes my wife wants to make to the house."

Dane Harcourt hated making changes, but I didn't say that. Instead I nodded and got my boss on the phone. He asked me if it *was* possible and I said I could rearrange for three but not before. He gave me the go-ahead and hung up.

Mr. Ward was very pleased, and while we waited, we talked.

Or he talked and I listened.

He started in about his wife because that was the reason he was there. They'd been married forty years and he was building her a new house in Highland Park to celebrate. I asked all kinds of questions and he showed me pictures of his family, which he told me all about. He had two sons; the oldest was in business with him as a tax attorney/corporate lawyer and his youngest was a plastic surgeon.

"Got more women crawling all over him than I've ever seen," he chuckled. "But he's just playing the field, waiting for the right one to come along."

I nodded, asked if the attorney was married.

"Engaged to a pediatrician. Sweetest little gal you ever met. We're having her and her family for Thanksgiving tomorrow. Got a huge spread—like, twenty people coming."

"Must be nice."

We talked about architecture and art and for some reason music, because he didn't understand what was going on with what people were singing about "these days," and I played him some jazz remixes on my iPod. He got a big kick out of using the headphones and was impressed that I knew my world history. He had been in Vietnam, doing three tours before coming home to finish up his law degree, at the same time becoming a certified public accountant. I asked a million questions about the war and if he had been disappointed that neither of his sons had enlisted.

He nodded at me. "Very perceptive question, son." But he didn't answer so I figured it was private.

He was intrigued by the assortment of pens on my desk, and I explained that each one had its own special function. I took him with me to get my afternoon coffee from Starbucks, and on my way back, when I hesitated, he asked me what I was doing. I explained about the scented oils that I was out of and needed to pick up. I laughed when he offered to go along to the head shop with me.

Mr. Ward looking at bongos and candles and watching people smoke from a hookah was hysterical. I let him smell the patchouli, sandalwood, and amber oil I wore and he cocked his head back and forth, giving me a look like it was okay. I couldn't stop smiling. When we got back, Dane was there and thanked me for entertaining our guest. I nodded and Mr. Ward draped an arm across my shoulders and said that he had not had such a lovely afternoon in he couldn't remember how long.

After work Dane sent me to pick up wine for him to take to Thanksgiving dinner the following day at his friend Jude's house. He invited me along for the fifth time and I turned him down for the last time. I assured him that I would be fine.

While not convinced, neither did he push me. He knew me well enough to know the harder I was pressed, the harder I resisted.

On my way to the train I got a call.

"Jory?"

"Yes?"

"Jory, this is Truman Ward from this afternoon."

"Oh," I smiled. "How're you, sir?"

"I'm good, thank you. I wanted to call and see if maybe you would like to join my family for dinner tomorrow night, say around five?"

"Sir, tomorrow's Thanksgiving."

"Yes, I know," he chuckled. "That's why I'm calling."

"But sir, you're having like twenty people you said and—"

"And one more won't make a difference. I have to say I so enjoyed meeting you and talking to you and I would just love it if you showed up."

"But—"

"It's very casual, son, no suits or that kind of crap, just football and good food and family and friends—you'll have a good time. Please say you'll come."

How could I say no? "Yessir."

"Oh excellent. I'm really pleased."

"You're kinda weird," I assured him.

And he laughed harder before he gave me the address.

* * * *

The train to Highland Park dropped me off on a platform in the middle of town. I saw the deli Mr. Ward had told me to look for, and so took the right as I had been directed. I passed the little shops and found that the crisp air, the leaves blowing around on the ground, and the gray sky were very soothing. I loved being outside in the fall, the smell of fireplaces, that mix of cold, slight damp, and dirt making me feel good. Like winter was coming, which I loved most of all.

The house was a huge four-story Georgian colonial with one of those crescent-shaped driveways, done in red cobblestone. There were flower beds on both sides of the porch that went from one end of the front of the house to the other. The fall cornucopia wreath on the front door was very festive, if not a little over the top. I used the knocker because I couldn't find the doorbell and waited.

I was ignored for a minute when the door opened. The guy that answered was talking to someone behind him and was still engaged in conversation, only turning to me after several minutes. When he did, I felt better. His smile was warm and seemed genuine.

"Oh," he seemed taken aback. "Hi. Who're you?"

I smiled wide. "I'm Jory."

"You're Jory?" He was staring at me, deep into my eyes.

"My dad's friend Jory?"

I chuckled. "Yeah."

"Oh for crissakes, Colt, let him in."

He stepped sideways and I walked past him, turning to wait for him to close the door.

"Hi," a woman said, stepping in close to me, offering her hand. "I'm Cretia Ward, Truman's daughter."

I eased her forward and kissed her cheek before I let her go. "Jory Keyes."

"Well, Jory," she nodded, looking me over. "You are so not what we expected."

"No?"

"No." She giggled. "Gimme your coat."

"You were thinkin' I was gonna be taller?" I teased her, sliding the cashmere peacoat off my shoulders to hand to her.

She giggled. "He said colleague from work. I was not expecting an Abercrombie & Fitch model."

I laughed and passed her the bottle of wine Dane had made me take when I told him where I was going.

"Oh thank you. Let's go give it to my mom."

"Wait."

We both turned to the guy who had his hand out for me to take.

"I didn't meet you."

I smiled warmly and took the offered hand, covering it with my other.
"Jory."

"Colton." He nodded and his eyes didn't leave mine.

"Pleasure."

"You too, Jory."

I took a breath and let Cretia grab my hand and pull me after her.

My apartment would have fit in the kitchen, and when I made that observation aloud Cretia smiled and wrapped both arms around my one. I heard my name almost shouted and couldn't contain the smile as Mr. Ward walked over and pulled me into a tight bear hug.

"You made it—I'm so pleased."

When he pushed me out to arm's length, I smiled into his eyes.

"Come meet my wife."

Mrs. Ward wanted me to call her Bette and she, too, couldn't seem to keep her hands off me, instead taking my hand and showing me her home. She was impressed that I knew that the china in her glass cabinets was actually Limoge from France.

"Jory," she said, looking into my eyes. "You're just full of useless information, aren't you?"

I laughed with her. "Pretty much."

I sat cross-legged on the kitchen counter talking to her, and Cretia came in and assured me that not one of her children was allowed to do that.

"It's because he's so pretty," Bette told her daughter.

"You *are* pretty," Cretia baited me. "I wish I had your hair and your long eyelashes."

"I never thought much of brown eyes." Bette smiled warmly at me. "But yours are just gorgeous, Jory. Like melted chocolate."

"Oooh, Jory, you've got her waxing poetic." Cretia giggled.

"Better watch out, she's gonna wanna adopt you."

"That'd be all right," I assured her.

"Why?" Bette was suddenly wary. "Where's your mother, angel?"

"Oh I don't know." I forced a smile. "I never met her."

The gasp was followed by her hand clutching my knee.

"What happened?"

So I told her about how I'd been abandoned, left with my grandmother to raise, and Cretia stayed instead of leaving.

When people came into the kitchen to say hello as more and more guests were arriving, she shushed them and waved them away dismissively. I watched the sheepish looks on their faces, but I went on with my story because she was riveted. I spoke fast, in the same matter-of-fact way I had when I'd explained the circumstances to Sam. Before him, and now Mrs. Ward, I hadn't talked about my mother in ages.

And all at once I realized that any sting that had been lingering from my childhood was gone. It was weird to think that I had ever felt sorry for myself because of her abandonment. It seemed so insignificant a detail now. I had rich, warm memories of growing up with my grandmother. I wished I'd had more time with her. This was my only regret anymore.

Bette Ward did not share my reaction. She leaned into my lap and put her arms around my waist. Cretia had tears in her eyes as I patted her mother's back and rested my cheek in her hair.

"Jesus, what's goin' on in here?"

We all turned to the door and there was a stunning man there looking at the three of us.

"Hi, Trip." Cretia sniffled, smiling through her tears. "We're just talking."

"About what, the Holocaust?"

I chuckled and tipped Bette's face up to me before I kissed her forehead. "You all right?"

She nodded before she let out a shaky breath. "Jump down and meet my son."

I slid off the counter, and the man came forward to meet me. He had been looking at his mother and his sister, but finally I drew his attention.

"Hi," he said softly, moving forward, holding out his hand for me to take.

I smiled and took his hand, liking the feel of the warm skin in mine. "Hey. I'm Jory."

He nodded and his eyes locked on mine. "Trip."

"Really?"

He shrugged, still holding my hand. "What can I tell you?"

It's a bad nickname that stuck. That's why ya always gotta be careful with that kind of thing."

"I'll remember that." I said, and tried to release his hand.

He tightened his hold so I didn't move.

"Are you the plastic surgeon or the tax attorney?"

His smile was broad and his eyes crinkled in half. "You've been talking to my dad."

"Yes."

"Well, I'm going to be a surgeon, but as of right now I'm still a resident."

I nodded. "Well, he's very proud of you."

"I know he is," he said, slipping his hand from mine, the other immediately going to my shoulder. "Did you get a drink?"

"No."

"No?" He looked past me to his mother. "What is this, dehydrate the guest day? You have like eight other people without drinks out there, Mother! I told you before, you can't be in here cooking—you gotta mingle. You're the hostess."

She smacked his arm as she passed him, touched my cheek, and left through the swinging door with Cretia right behind her.

"So did you really take my dad to a head shop?"

I winced a little and he smiled as he led me out into the living room.

Colton met us and invited me over to meet his fiancée, Channing Sinclair. Truman was right, she was very nice, and the way she looked at his son had to be very satisfying. Her father came over to meet me and then her mother came over and then cousins and friends and it very quickly became a blur. I did what I was supposed to and asked if I could help in the kitchen. I was ushered back out and went to sit with Truman. For whatever reason I was comfortable with him and we started talking about landscaping. I told him I would love to look at the backyard and he took me up on my offer.

We walked out to the gazebo and then the rest of the way out to the very edge of his property. His neighbor was out with his family, playing some croquet, so we both leaned over and talked awhile. It was really nice and I decided right there and then that someday I would own a house. It had never occurred to me before.

When we got back it was time to eat, and I was seated between Cretia and Trip for dinner. It was fun: lots of conversation between people who seemed to all genuinely like one another. I had never experienced the whole family meal thing except for once before with Sam's family. This family and their friends weren't loud and everyone sat down together, no kids running around, just eating, drinking, talking, and lots of laughing. I was comfortable, and when Bette leaned over me, wrapping her arms around my neck, I let my head rest against hers.

"Mom?" Trip asked her.

"Your dad was right. I want to keep this one."

"Sorry, man," Trip chuckled. "She's crazy."

"I like her," I said, closing my eyes, leaning back, and letting her hold me.

"Come keep me company," she said quickly and I got up and followed her into the kitchen.

She washed and I dried and we turned on the radio in the kitchen and I started dancing. She laughed and I was all over her. Cretia came in and told me all that heat was wasted on her mother.

"No it's not," Bette assured her. "But you know, Jory, I've got to go to a reception tomorrow night and they want me to get up and do the Electronic Glide."

"The Electric Slide," I corrected her and held out my hand.

"Here, c'mere and I'll show you."

Her smile was mischievous and Cretia watched us move to the middle of the floor. I had her shaking her ass and doing the turns in fifteen minutes. She was having a blast, and when Channing and Colton came in and joined us, I told them that we could do the Hustle next.

I went to get my peacoat out of the hall closet, and when I turned around Trip was there.

"Where ya going?"

"I gotta work tomorrow and the last train's coming pretty soon."

"The train? You didn't drive?"

I smiled at him, shaking my head. "No, I don't have a car."

"Stay," he said seriously, hand on my shoulder. "I'll take you home. I live in the city too."

"Oh no, I don't wanna put you out. I can just—"

His hand moved to the side of my neck. "You're not putting me out, Jory."

I nodded and his hand slid to the nape of my neck, his fingers threading through my hair.

"In fact," he smiled gently. "Can I take you to dinner tomorrow night?"

I tipped my head and looked at him. "Your dad said you've got women all over you—you just haven't met the right one yet."

"My dad sees what he wants, and so far I haven't been serious enough about anyone to bring them home."

"Meaning a guy."

He nodded slowly. "That's right."

I stepped back away from him. "Your old man really likes me—I am not gonna be the one to give him even a second of misery."

He gave me a funny look. "Baby, you're jumping the gun a little, aren't you? Shouldn't we screw around before we decide if you're gonna be the one I'll

bring home to my folks?" The last was finished with a chuckle as he grabbed hold of the lapel of my coat.

I nodded and brushed his hand off me before I jogged back into the living room. I went to kiss Bette good-bye and it was nice that she begged me to stay longer. Truman got up and pulled me into a brief clench before he thanked me for coming and made me promise not to be a stranger. Colton and Cretia both gave me their numbers, and Channing told me to call her the following day, so she could get my address to invite me to her wedding. It was nice that they all wanted to include me. My phone vibrated and I excused myself to answer it.

"Jory."

"Hey, boss." I smiled into the phone.

"Are you still in Highland Park?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because I'm in Parkridge, so if you want I'll come by and pick you up on my way back."

Which translated to "I'm coming to get you." Because he never offered unless he had already decided what he wanted to do. He wasn't hardwired to make overtures; if he ever made a suggestion, the answer just needed to be yes.

"Okay," I said quickly. "Lemme give you the address."

"I have it. The man is my client, after all."

"Yessir."

"Knock it off."

I smiled wide and realized, as usual, that just talking to him brought up this bubbly feeling in me. I had family—he was it. "You want me to wait

outside?"

"Yes, Jory, stand outside and freeze your ass off."

I laughed and people looked at me as I hung up and sat back down on the couch beside Bette.

"You're going to stay?"

"My boss is gonna get me, so I'll stay a little longer."

"Oh I can't wait to meet Dad's architect," Cretia squeaked out. "He speaks so highly of him."

"Jory, can I speak to you?" Trip called to me from the kitchen.

I got up, and when the door swung closed behind me, I saw him leaning against the counter, ankles crossed, arms crossed, waiting.

"Yes?"

"That was stupid, what I said before, and your concern for my dad is actually really refreshing." The corner of his mouth curled with a trace of a smile. "So I'm asking again—may I please take you out?"

I looked at him, trying to figure him out. Aesthetically there was no reason to say no. The man was very nice to look at. With clear hazel eyes, thick, dark brown hair and a lean, muscular frame, he was definitely my type. The problem was he had "player" written all over him, and I wasn't trying to be another notch in anyone's bedpost.

"I don't think so," I said slowly, because it wasn't what I really wanted to say. It was the smart thing to do, though. "I think you're outta my league, Doctor Ward."

He nodded and pushed off the counter, walking toward me. "If I promise to just feed you—not even try and kiss you?

How 'bout then?"

"What's the fun in that?" I grinned lazily.

He bit his bottom lip. "Listen, Jory—how 'bout you take me out? You name the place and I'll be there. You can pay and everything."

I squinted at him and his smile lit his face. "How is that a good deal for me?"

He reached out and grabbed the lapel of my coat as he had earlier, drawing me close. "C'mon, I'm sorry already—

Jesus, I never work this hard."

I arched a brow for him.

"And you know you're gorgeous so you can treat me like this," he said, his eyes locked on mine.

I just stared back.

"You want me to beg?"

My eyes narrowed.

"God, you are beautiful... say yes."

"I'll meet you at seven for drinks at The Arbor, over there off Halsted."

He nodded and smiled, undoing the buttons on my coat, his hands slipping inside to my sweater as he stepped closer to me. "I was thinking it could be tonight. A friend of mine is having a party—I'd love to take you." Slowly he stroked the back of his fingers up the front of my sweater, over my abdomen.

"Tomorrow," I said.

We both heard the doorbell ring and I wondered absently where the button was outside. Bette called for me, and when I turned to go, Trip caught me with an arm around my neck.

"Don't blow me off, okay? I want to see you."

I smiled and let my head fall forward as his lips brushed over the back of my neck. He felt good, there was no denying that. "Okay."

"Jory, are you sure I can't take you home?"

But the door opened and he was instantly off me. Cretia poked her head in and told me that my boss was standing in the living room, waiting for me. I saw how big her eyes were.

"He's gorgeous, right?" I teased her.

"Ohmygod Jory, that's the most beautiful man I've ever seen in my life."

I chuckled and followed her out with Trip trailing after me.

Dane stood with Truman, glancing around the room in response to what the other man was pointing out. I realized that not one pair of eyes in the room was not on the two of them or, more precisely, on Dane. Easy to understand the fascination, as in his black Versace suit with the black dress shirt underneath and black cashmere topcoat, he looked like he had just walked off the cover of a magazine. The short jet-black hair and the steel gray eyes, sharp, chiseled features, his height, the width of his shoulders, his chest, and just the way everything fit... he was breathtaking. The air of cool detachment, the absence of a smile, the way he oozed confidence... his presence in a room was palpable, he charged the air around him. And I used to think I was over-romanticizing him, but after five years of being his assistant, after being with him when he met people, seeing their reactions, I knew it was simple truth. The man was riveting and there was no way not to notice.

I walked over to him and he tossed me his digital camera.

"What am I doing with this?"

"Look at the woman in the fifth picture."

I flipped through the photos as he was offered a drink that he graciously declined.

"Who is that?" he asked me, leaning in close, pointing on the screen.

I turned and looked up into his eyes. "That's Sabine Raleigh."

The completely vacant look I got in return made me laugh.

"Who?"

"You went on like three dates with her," I informed him.

"When?"

"Late July."

He scowled at me.

"What?"

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure of what? That you dated her?"

"Yes."

I wasn't positive if he was kidding or not. I almost laughed.

"Jory, are you—"

"You're not kidding." I was in awe. "Holy shit."

"Watch your language," he snapped at me, shaking his head before he pointed at Truman. "Go thank him for his hospitality so we can go."

I did as I was directed and hugged Truman and Bette again before I caught up with my boss. His hand went where it always did, to the back of my neck, as he steered me out of the house. I would have walked into the side of the car, as I was looking at the rest of the pictures, but he grabbed the collar of my coat and yanked me to a stop.

"So what happened?" I probed, looking up at his profile.

"Get in," he said flatly, holding open the door of his Mercedes for me.

I got in, leaned over, and opened his door before putting my seat belt on, still flipping through the photos. The camera was really nice, and from the looks of it Jude's home was stunning.

"What's he got? Like a loft or something?" I asked when he got in.

"Or something."

"It's nice."

"Yes, it is."

I waited until we were on our way before I asked again what had happened.

"Wait," he said suddenly, pulling over to get out and take off his suit jacket and lay it over his topcoat in the backseat.

When he got back in and pulled away from the curb I asked him again what he'd done. There was no answer.

"Boss?"

"You know what," he exhaled quickly. "Stop saying that, all right?"

I looked at his profile. "Stop saying what?"

"Boss."

"Boss?"

"Yes, don't—it's not us anymore."

This was news. "So what should I—"

"Just use my name. Just Dane all right?"

"Okay."

"Excellent." He sighed, long and loud.

"So... fess up. What'd you say to Sabine?"

He cleared his throat.

"I'm waiting."

"I told her it was a pleasure to meet her."

My eyes widened as I looked at him.

He glanced at me before he rolled his eyes.

"Oh shit," I breathed out. "What'd she say?"

"She slapped me and left."

I almost laughed but I covered it with a lot of coughing.

"It's not funny."

"No, it's not," I agreed, clearing my throat. "Jesus."

"You're not helping."

I flipped through the pictures again.

"Say something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know."

"Should I say oh shit? 'Cause I'm thinking oh shit."

"Jory—"

"Oh shit," I breathed out again. "Christ, Dane, maybe it's time to slow down, huh? Holy crap."

"I truly had no idea who she was."

"Holy shit."

"Stop saying that."

"I can't help it. She must have been so humiliated. I mean... I never really liked her but damn... at least I remembered who she is."

He made a noise of disgust.

I raked my fingers through my hair. "Poor Sabine. She's gotta be horrified."

"I would imagine so."

"Holy shit."

He growled and told me to shut up.

"And she's the one with all the great restaurants, remember?"

Clearly, from the vacant look on his face, even with prodding, he had no idea.

"Well I can tell you that she called for two weeks after you broke up with her."

"I don't remember that."

"'Cause once you break up with them, I'm on deck." I cracked a grin. "I handle cleanup."

He looked at me hard.

"What?"

"You do a lot for me."

"'Cause ya pay me to," I teased him.

He grunted and leaned back, getting comfortable in the seat as he drove. "I turned down the food offer for you. Mr.

Ward's wife wanted to make you a doggy bag."

"Oh that would've been nice."

"No," he said, squinting his eyes. "You don't do charity."

Which made no sense. "It's a common form of kindness here on Earth to give people food to take home with them when they leave. We even have special receptacles to carry the food in. It's called Tupperware."

He grunted again and I settled back in my seat, watching the streetlights go by.

"I hate leftovers."

We had been silent for several miles and so his voice, coupled with the fact that he was still following the same train of thought, surprised me.

"What?"

"Leftovers," he repeated. "I hate them. It's never as good as you remember."

"Uh-huh." I smiled slowly. "You think maybe you're over-analyzing this a little?"

He cleared his throat.

I waited, and when he remained silent I was going to just start talking about something, anything, some random topic, but when I opened my mouth he began.

"Before my parents were killed, my mother had ordered a cake for my birthday. Eighteen was huge, and the party she had planned was going to be a spectacle. The news that the plane had gone down came the same day they delivered the cake, and I guess our housekeeper just shoved it in the refrigerator without thinking."

He never talked about his parents, so I was silent, making sure I didn't disturb him.

"I found it in there like a week after the funeral, this huge Superman cake. What possessed her to order it I will never know, but it was there, taking up an entire shelf with like

'Happy Birthday to our superhero' or something to that effect on it." He was silent for a few minutes, just watching the road. "And I knew she would have gotten the biggest kick out of watching me blow out candles and do the Superman pose and everything else, so I took it out and cut a slice."

I couldn't imagine how much Dane missed his parents.

There had just been the three of them and his grandmother.

She had passed two years before his folks. And they had died aboard a private plane on their way home from one of his father's many business trips. His mother didn't usually go with him, but the meeting had been in San Francisco and she loved the city by the bay.

"The cake was really good, I remember, but there was so much of it. If I'd have had my party... but it was a full sheet and I was just one guy. I swear it lasted forever. Every night for desert—I had it. My friends came by, my dad's business associates, people I didn't know—I offered everybody cake and they probably thought how weird it was that I had this cheesy little kid's cake, but nobody said anything about it."

I stared at his profile and waited.

"I remember there was still half of it left and I tried to give some to Jude to take home. He said he hated leftovers, and I realized that that was all it was—something leftover. I had made a big deal out of something I'm sure my mother would have tossed out the next morning, if not the night of the party. She always wanted me to live in the moment—the cake lying in the fridge day after day would have annoyed the hell out of her."

I nodded as he turned to smile at me.

"I pitched it the next day."

"And so what—now you don't believe in leftovers on some spiritual level?"

"I just don't like them at all."

"So that's why I couldn't take any from Mrs. Ward?"

"Yes."

"Spoken like someone who never had to make one meal stretch into two or three. When you grow up poor, leftovers are part of survival."

"I hate them. I never want to see something twice. You can have too much of a good thing."

I shook my head. "You're very disturbed."

"Obviously."

"Are you going to send Sabine some flowers and a card of apology?"

He rolled his eyes like I was stupid. "Sure. Find me a card for I'm sorry I forgot you."

I chuckled. "Seriously... maybe you should slow down, huh, player?"

"Shut up."

I sat there, smiling out the window.

"You're saying you have no weird thing from your childhood that makes no logical sense?"

"No, I won't say that."

"Tell me."

I shrugged. "Garbage bags."

"I'm sorry?"

"Garbage bags. You know the plastic kind? Hefty or Glad or whatever."

"Yes, I know what a garbage bag is, just make me understand."

"Okay. See, when I was little it was a luxury item. We used the plastic bags that they packed our groceries in to put trash in because real garbage bags were at the bottom of the list. My grandmother lived on her Social Security and the state helped her with food stamps for me. That was all there was, so... but the little bags broke all the time and sometimes all we had were the brown paper ones. It was a mess."

"And what?"

"So now I keep like four different sizes of garbage bags at all times. I completely freak if I run out of them. I feel like I'm back there in the trailer park."

"But you loved your grandmother."

"I did, but I didn't love being called poor white trash for where I lived. I didn't love our scary neighbors or never having enough so we could pay the electric bill and eat at the same time. Sometimes at the end of the month all we had was rice and beans."

"Which is probably why you don't eat either."

"Probably."

"Huh. Garbage bags."

"Yep. Any size you need." I sighed. "Even got lawn bags."

"You don't have a lawn."

"So not the point."

He laughed softly and then let out a deep breath. "We're both deeply flawed."

"You think?"

"I know."

"Well, if no leftovers and a variety of garbage bags is the extent of our neurosis—then I'm fine with it."

"Okay." Dane agreed with me.

"Okay."

"Are you tired?"

"No, why?"

"I don't feel like going home."

"You wanna hang out with me?"

He shrugged and I smiled because he did.

"Did it hurt when Sabine slapped you?"

"Could we stop revisiting this topic?"

I almost cackled. "Open mouth, insert foot."

"Shut up."

"Your friends are gonna give you so much shit."

He groaned loudly and I asked him what he wanted to do.

"I don't care."

We drove to the Varsity theatre downtown where they were showing *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and they had recliners, couches, and overstuffed chairs instead of rows of seats. I got us both steaming mugs of oolong and got a weird look when I passed it to him before I sat down.

"What? You don't want me to sit by you?"

He just continued to look at me like I had sprouted wings or something equally strange.

"You want me to pull a chair over here in case some hot woman wants to sit down?"

He sipped his tea. "No."

"Then what's with the look?"

"No look, it's just interesting."

"What is?"

He turned his deep dark eyes on me. "You, Jory."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He smiled over the top of his cup. "Well, the fact that you're here hanging with me at twenty-two years old instead of out getting laid... that's interesting."

I snorted. "I'll be twenty-three in January."

"Which has what to do with anything I just said?"

"I dunno."

"Just talking to hear yourself, huh?"

"No, I just... isn't Thanksgiving a holiday that you're supposed to spend with your family?"

"Yes, it is."

I looked him in the eye. "Well then."

He stared at me and I stared back and between my words and the way I met his gaze with my own, he understood what I was trying to say.

"Okay," he said as the movie started.

And somewhere near the middle of the film he gave my leg a gentle pat as he slouched down in his seat. It was not to be missed that the man treated me more like his brother than his assistant. I wondered briefly if he realized it himself.

Chapter Two

Sitting at the bar the next evening at The Arbor, watching Trip on the dance floor with his friends, I wondered how I had so misread a dinner invitation. I thought we would get drinks, move on to dinner, and finally take a walk and get to know each other. I had imagined us alone. Apparently he had imagined dancing at the club with friends. He had invited half a dozen people to join us and he was currently sandwiched between two very beautiful women, doing the bump and grind. As I glanced at them I realized that what I had thought would be just him and me, he had seen as an opportunity to party. And I could get out there and do some dirty dancing of my own, but I didn't feel like it. At twenty-two, I was tired of the club scene. I'd rather be home ironing my clothes. This was what came of having a fake ID at sixteen. All the excitement was gone by the time you were legal enough to do all the things the law said you could.

I declined two drinks the bartender tried to put down in front of me, sent over from men I didn't know, and instead paid my tab and headed for the door. I glanced over my shoulder but Trip didn't even notice. I was going to make a clean getaway.

Outside on the street my phone rang and I leaned back against the glass window and answered it.

"I need to talk to you," Sam Kage said flatly on the other end.

I was surprised that I was talking to the vice detective again. I had thought our last encounter was it. When he came to my apartment in the middle of the night and yelled at me for not letting him protect me, I thought I had finally driven him away. I had hoped I was wrong, prayed I was wrong, but feared I was right. Sam Kage had a hold over me that was hard to articulate and I was usually so good at talking.

"Jory."

"Sorry, why do you need to talk to me?"

"You're my witness, you idiot."

My friend's husband had killed a man and I had been around to see it. Sam Kage was the detective on the case.

Thrust together by circumstance, we had found something more, something unexpected, and it had been moving forward until we hit a snag. Sam considered me, sleeping with me, having me around, a detour when I had been thinking permanent. I had left instead of trying to sway his feelings. And it killed me to leave him, but I knew that it would be fatal down the road. As it was I thought of him often, and each and every time my heart hurt. Even being on the phone with him was hard. But once I could breathe I could guess why he was calling. I had been chased by guys sent to silence me and my testimony just nights before and he was probably following up on that. I had called his partner, Dominic Kairov, instead of him, which I knew had been petty.

It was the reason for Sam's appearance at my door in the wee hours of the night. He had showed up to yell at me.

"Are you there?"

"Yeah, sorry. Go ahead."

He cleared his throat. "You know those guys that chased you the other night, we brought them in on—"

"You know who they are?"

"Yeah, we know who they fuckin' are."

"Oh."

"Oh," he repeated like I was brain-dead. "Jesus."

"Maybe I'll just hang—"

"Wait," he said fast. "Just wait."

I sighed long and loud but said nothing.

"Okay, so like I said, we brought them in on separate charges and their rap sheets are good for attempted murder, aggravated assault, and attempted rape. Lucky... you were just lucky they didn't get a hold of you."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Yeah? That's all you have to say?"

"What do you want me to say?" I said softly, rubbing the bridge of my nose, realizing that I hadn't eaten dinner yet and I had had a lot to drink while I was watching Trip dance.

"Why do you sound all weird?"

"I'm drunk," I said flatly.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Where are you?"

"I'm on my way home."

"How 'bout you meet me for dinner?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You hate me." I said and I sounded petulant even to myself.

"I don't," he said, and I could almost hear the smile in his voice. The flutter that rolled through my stomach was really annoying.

"Well, I hate you." I was back to sounding like a brat.

"No ya don't."

And I didn't. I was crazy about him plain and simple and too drunk not to show it. I chuckled. "Well somebody hates somebody or we'd be together."

"You're a drama queen, that's why we're not together."

I grunted.

"Just come on. Tell me where ya are."

So I told him and he said to give him five minutes. I promised to give him that. I fiddled with my phone, deleting old text messages and downloading a new song for my ringtone. It was always a good diversion. I lost track of time.

"Jory."

I looked up as Trip came to stand over me. "Hey, man."

"Where'd ya go?"

"I'm gonna jet," I smiled slowly. "I'll see ya later."

"But I thought we were gonna hang out."

"So did I, but it's cool."

"No," he said, squatting down beside me, hand on my back. "I want to—"

"J!"

I looked to the street and there was Sam getting out of his tank, which he had parked beside the curb. I really needed to ask him why he felt the need to drive the monster car. He didn't need to compensate for anything.

"Who's that?" Trip asked me as Sam came around the front of the SUV and strode toward us.

And I had the strangest moment of clarity, watching him close in on me.
"That's Sam."

"Jory."

My eyes flicked back to Trip's.

"Who's Sam?"

"Hey."

We both looked up at Detective Kage as he held his hand out to me.

"That was fast." I smiled at him, liking the way the corduroys hugged his long, muscular legs, the enormous belt buckle, and the steel-toed boots that were all beat to hell. A white T-shirt peeked out from under a flannel work shirt and the fleece-lined denim jacket finished off his outfit. "What'd you do, work construction today, Detective?"

His smile came slowly, warming his eyes, firing them as he stared down at me. "I did a lot of walking around today. I didn't wanna freeze my ass off."

"Canvassing the neighborhood," I offered as I took his hand and he hauled me to my feet.

"That's right," he said gently, his hand on my shoulder. "I forgot you watch TV so you know what's going on."

I nodded, agreeing with him that I was a big dork, as Trip stood up next to me. "Sam, this is my friend, Trip Ward, Trip, this is Sam Kage."

They didn't shake, they just nodded at each other as Sam's hand went to the back of my neck and he drew me closer to him.

"Let's get some food in you."

"Okay," I agreed, offering Trip my hand. "I'll see ya, man."

"Wait, no—Jory, I thought we were gonna—"

"You're leavin' me hangin' here." I smiled wide.

Instead of taking my hand he stepped into my arms and hugged me tight, his hands sliding over my back. "We should've gone somewhere just the two of us."

"Yeah, we should've." I squeezed back because he felt good in my arms. I needed to be held, I craved it.

"We gotta go," Sam said, and I felt his hand tangle in my hair, pull gently but insistently.

I let Trip go and Sam grabbed the lapel of my suit jacket.

"Take care," I said.

"Jory, lemme take you out tomorrow. I'll pick you up at work and we'll have dinner and then we can—"

"He'll be busy," Sam said gruffly, yanking me forward so hard I almost fell. "Get in the car before I put you in the car."

"Oh yeah?" I teased him, shrugging off his hand, walking backwards. "Ya think you can do that?"

He grunted and moved faster than I would have thought he could. I had wrongly assumed that a man his size wasn't capable of speed, but he had a hold of my arm again before I even realized what he was doing. "Lemme show you where the car is."

I smiled, looking down at my feet. "I can walk."

"You're barely vertical. How many drinks did you have?"

"I dunno."

"Why were you drinking anyway?"

"I was sitting by myself and I got bored."

"Why were you sitting alone?" he asked as he opened the door for me, holding it open.

I climbed up and he slammed the door behind me. I glanced back over to the club entrance and Trip was still standing there, watching me. I waved and he returned the gesture.

"You were supposed to be on a date with that guy?" Sam asked when he opened the door and slid into the driver's seat.

"I think so." I turned and looked at him. "Isn't that what dinner usually implies?"

He reached out and put a hand on my cheek. "You look confused, baby."

"Well, he invited me to dinner but not alone. What is that?"

"I used to invite friends if I wanted the other person to think it wasn't really a date."

I shrugged, brushing his hand away. "Then I guess it wasn't really a date."

"I guess not," he agreed, starting the car.

"But last night when he invited me he said—"

"You spent Thanksgiving with him?"

"With him and his family, yeah." I was more than tipsy or I wouldn't have just started chatting with him like we were girlfriends or something.

"They're really nice but he came off all player and everything and so I said I

wouldn't go out with him but then he apologized for thinking he was getting laid and—"

"What made him think he was gettin' laid?"

"Did you see him? He's gorgeous—I'm sure he gets laid all the time."

He just nodded.

I smiled in spite of myself. "I might be drunker than I thought."

"You're kidding."

"Even drunk, I know sarcasm when I hear it."

"Just shut the fuck up."

"You know if you're gonna be all—"

"What, J? What are you gonna do? I can do whatever the hell I want with you starting now, and there ain't shit you can do about it. So you know what... screw the food. I'm taking you home with me."

"Wait—no, I've gotta work tomorrow. I—"

"Tomorrow's Saturday. You don't hafta work."

"Yes, I do. I've gotta deliver something for my boss. I've gotta be there at like—"

"You're coming with me."

"I can't. Don't—"

"Don't what? Don't just do whatever I want since you always do whatever the hell you want?"

"No, I—"

"You don't always get to have things your way, so sit there and shut up."

I vowed it would be a cold day in hell before I ever spoke to him again. Arms crossed, staring out my window, I didn't even look at him. When he suddenly pulled off down a street I didn't know, I turned and looked at him.

He was gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were white. "I fuckin' hate this."

"What?" It was an early thaw for hell.

He turned and looked at me. "This. You and me, I fuckin' hate it."

"Then let me out and I'll get—"

"No," he roared and in the small area it was even louder. It resonated through my whole body.

"I don't—"

"This is eatin' me up."

I watched him swallow hard, saw how ragged his eyes were, how wrung out he looked.

"Jory...."

I was good at changing the subject when people were drowning in too much emotion. I needed to help him not push himself under. "That night you saw me out, did you really think I looked like a hustler?" I teased him, smiling lazily. We had passed each other, me walking out with three of my female co-workers, him walking in with his friends, a beautiful blonde on his arm. He had delivered the scorching remark that I looked like I was a rent boy.

"No." His voice sounded hoarse, crackly.

"Did I look good?"

"Yes."

"Do I look good now?"

In answer he was on me, his mouth sealing over mine, his tongue pushing for entrance that I instantly allowed. As soon as my lips parted, his tongue swept inside, and he gathered me close, crushing me against him, kissing me so hard, so long, reacquainting himself with every part of my mouth.

When I pulled back to look up into his face, he bit my bottom lip to keep me close. I smiled and he ended up kissing my nose, my eyes, still holding me in his arms so tight.

"Did you sleep with the blonde?" I asked him, holding my breath.

His voice was low and husky, filled with gravel. "No, Jory. I don't sleep with anyone but you."

"Then why say those things you said, why say you wanted to get married and—"

"'Cause you were being so fuckin' smug," he barked at me, letting me go suddenly, pushing me back into my seat. "After we left my folks' place that day, you started talking like of course I'm gonna do this or that, talkin' like you fuckin' own me, like I belong to you... and for you it's so easy, you just fall in love and—"

"Who says I'm in love?" I argued.

His scowl was black. "Oh fuck you. I know you've got it bad so don't even try and sit there and pretend you don't.

How fast you ran—what you did—calling Dom instead of me—all that shit is about you creating drama because your feelings got hurt. Well, fuck you, J. You don't just run off if I do some stupid shit. You call me on it and tell

me I'm an idiot and tell me where to go. That's what you do. All that shit I said that Sunday—you think I meant any of that?"

I just stared at him.

His laugh was more a bark. "Fuck, you did. That's funny. I would've thought you knew me better."

"Why say it if you didn't mean it?" I repeated my earlier question.

"Because I was mad!" he roared at me, his hand on the back of my head to pull me close, staring into my eyes. "You can be gay and have your life and be whatever, but me, if I have you there's stuff I gotta let go."

"Then maybe you shouldn't let it go," I said honestly, staring deep into his beautiful eyes. "I mean, you resenting me down the road does not sound like a good time."

He cupped my face in his hands, drawing me close to kiss me breathless; kissing me so long I could hear my heart pounding in my ears from lack of oxygen.

I tore my mouth free and his hands went to my ass as he drew me across the seat, over the emergency brake into his lap, his lips on my throat, biting, licking, sucking, and kissing whatever skin he could reach. I trembled hard under his hands. He felt so good and I had never thought in a million years he would be the one holding me again.

"I have no choice anymore," he confessed, his nose running up the side of my neck as his lips trailed over my skin. "Need you. Can't sleep without you and it's only you."

There's no woman I want... no other guy... just you. I am completely addicted to you."

He was? "You are?"

"Yeah." He sounded so miserable. "Shit."

I smiled at him. "You don't sound very happy about it."

"Cause it would be a helluva lot easier if I didn't feel like this."

I looked into his eyes.

"But see I'm crazy about you makin' tea whenever there's a problem and your smell on my sheets and having you next to me in the middle of the night... I mean, I got used to all that so fuckin' fast."

He was a mess and I loved it.

"You put me through it when you left, and I've been so...

pissed... at you and then that night I saw you out and you look like you're okay you're fine without me, and—and I just wanted to take you home and... then the other night. What if you were hurt or killed or... what the fuck am I supposed to do? And that asshole tonight, he thinks he's got a shot with you... everybody thinks they've got a shot because I'm not around and... it's not gonna fuckin' happen! I will not allow it to happen. I want you with me all the time—can't have anyone else touching you or... you belong to me. You get that, right? You're mine. I think I'm gonna mark you—put my name on you so everybody knows that you're—"

It was too much, so I cut him off, shifting in his lap so my ass was pressing against his groin, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him with every drop of love and hate and everything in between that I had. I was ravenous for him, and the way I kissed him brought moans and whimpers up out of him. It made me smile—big, strong man just shaking with need for his lover. It was staggering to be that wanted, to drown in the heat of the kiss, of the embrace.

"Swear on my life, Sam, swear you're gonna tell everyone about me."

"Shit," he almost groaned and I could tell he was in agony.

"I fuckin' hate you."

"Swear."

"I swear," he almost yelled. "But you hafta take my word that I will. You need to trust me." He was exasperated, sick of fighting with me. It took so much energy.

"I do."

"I really fuckin' hate you," he growled at me, his hands sliding up and down my thighs as I shifted around in his lap, shoving my groin against his abdomen.

"I know." I smiled into his smoky blue eyes, reaching down between us, my hand slipping over the front of his jeans, rubbing gently but firmly.

"Jesus God," he blurted out, his head falling back against the seat. "Jory, I swear, baby, I did not get in bed with anybody else. Please-please-please let me get in bed with—"

"Yes, Sam." I cut him off. "Let's go to my place."

He lifted me up and dumped me back in my seat, and I laughed at how fast he drove, the squealing tires, the engine revving loud. I told him to put the light on the top of the car and he shot me a scathing look that just made me laugh that much harder.

At my door he hovered over me, his lips on the side of my neck and I had trouble with the lock. He took the keys and got the door opened and then locked behind us. Lifted into his arms, I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me to my bedroom. Clothes were torn off and left where they fell, both of us getting in bed at the same time. I scrambled back against the headboard and he came down on top of me, his mouth on me, swallowing me down his throat. I arched up against him and heard him fumbling in my nightstand. When slick fingers slid inside me, I yelled his name.

"I might hurt you," he confessed, lifting his lips from me.

"Try," I breathed out.

The noise in the back of his throat before he lifted my hips and buried himself in me, deep and hard, was raw and throaty. And the thrust would have hurt but his hand was back to stroke my shaft and keep my arousal at fever pitch.

To be filled and held at the same time was heaven.

"I missed you."

I had missed him more. My eyes were all over him, watching the cording muscles as he moved above me and then the way he caught his breath as I pushed against him, rolling him over on his back. His hands gripped my thighs as I rose above him, reaching up to pull me down, gather me close, he was so gentle as he caressed my skin.

"Promise me you won't go anywhere," he said, my face in his hands as he stared into my eyes, the throb of pleasure sliding through him as I seated myself deeper.

"I promise." I smiled slowly.

"Don't leave me. I'll hurt you if you try and leave me."

I smiled down into his eyes. "Yeah? You'll hurt me?"

"Jory," his voice cracked. "Please, baby, I—"

But my mouth on his cut him off as I kissed the worry right out of him. When I pulled back his eyes were clouded, his lips swollen. He looked utterly ravaged.

"You know that woman was right."

I squinted at him. "What are we talking about?"

"That woman that time, the one who came with my neighbor... you could be a model if you wanted. You are so beautiful."

I laughed at him, trying to kiss him.

"You are. Your mouth and your skin and your sweet ass."

"I don't think she was talking about my ass," I chuckled, loving our mindless pillow talk.

He ignored me. "I love how your eyes get when we're doing this—Jesus, J, it's so fuckin' hot."

I flicked my tongue over his lips before sucking his bottom lip inside my mouth. I felt his body shudder beneath mine and I shifted, lowering myself over him, taking all of him inside me.

"God, you feel so good." His voice was raw, husky, his pupils dilated as he stared up at me. "This shit is gonna kill me."

And I smiled as I made love to the man I loved. I was an idiot and a drama queen, he was right. He was as crazy about me as I was about him, and how I had missed that I had no idea.

"Please come back to my place, J."

"No." I grinned lazily, clenching my muscles so he gasped.

"I like it here."

His voice was filled with sand when he could finally speak.

"Then can I stay here with you?"

"I'll think about it."

He had me flat on my back a second later, my legs still around his waist. "I wanna sleep here with you, all right? Can I do that, please?"

"Yes," I said quickly as he pushed down into me. "Stay."

"I'm the only one you ever let sleep with you, huh, J?"

"Yes."

"Cause you trust me."

"Yes."

"Remember that all right?"

"Yes, dear."

The way he was looking at me made my heart hurt. My tears came from joy and when he wiped them away and kissed my eyes, I told him he could stay forever if he wanted.

"I want to," he said, his face buried on my shoulder.

I couldn't hold him tight enough.

Chapter Three

My phone woke me at five in the morning, and my boss, Dane Harcourt, was on the other end, reminding me I had to deliver the envelope with the charity information to the hospital before nine. I was groggy but I told him I was all over it. He grunted like maybe he wasn't sure I was coherent enough, and I asked him why he couldn't take it over himself.

He said that would be a neat trick considering he was in Cape Cod. It was another romantic getaway, and I made him promise to try and retain a name this time. He snorted out a laugh before he hung up. I lay there a minute, listening to the silence of the apartment, and realized that I was alone. I got up and went room to room just to make sure before I called Sam. He was on site at a crime scene somewhere and his voice sounded funny when he answered.

"What's wrong?" I asked gently.

No answer.

"I woke up and you were gone."

"You looked so sweet layin' there, all warm and... like a kitten."

"A kitten," I said after a minute.

Sam chuckled and I smiled because I'd caused that.

"I'm really glad you called." He sighed deeply. "You sound so good."

"I sound sleepy."

"Exactly. I wish I was there—in bed with you. I'm freezing out here."

"Are you okay?"

"No," was all he said.

"What can I do?"

"I dunno, kitten—what can you do?"

"Okay, enough with the kitten crap," I warned him, smiling into the phone.
"Just tell me. Please, Sam. Say something—anything."

He cleared his throat. "Okay—you can pack a bag and go to my place and wait for me. Can you do that?"

"I can do that."

"Cause if I could come home and you'd be there... that'd be good."

I heard the tremor in his voice. Whatever he was looking at, standing in, was bad. "Okay."

"I wanted to stay with you." His voice cracked, got very quiet. "I didn't wanna come out."

"Cause you like me all warm and naked in bed with you," I teased him.

"Yes," was all he got out, his voice filled with gravel.

Something was eating him up.

"I'll be there. What time are you getting off?"

"Six. Meet me there at six. I'll get some food and—"

"I'll get it," I told him. "You just come home."

"Just come home?"

"Yeah. Your part's simple."

"Okay. I'll see ya."

"Bye." I smiled.

"Wait."

"What?"

Long silence. "Nothing."

He wanted to say something or he wanted me to say something. "Tell me."

"Be careful walking around, okay? Call me if you need me."

"I will. I'll see ya at six."

"I left my extra set of keys on your nightstand."

"You did?"

"I did."

"Okay."

"Those are yours to keep, all right."

"Sam," I said breathlessly. "Are you sure you wanna—"

"I'm sure. I'll see ya later, kitten."

"Sam, you gotta stop with the—"

But he cut me off when he hung up. I went to my nightstand and picked up the keys. The key chain was obviously new and I had to smile at the rhinestone encrusted J. That had to be thrown out right away. How gay did he think I was?

* * * *

It was a silent auction to benefit the Pediatric Unit at the hospital. Originally my boss had been contacted to be one of the bachelors silently auctioned off, but he'd declined and said he would provide free services instead. The hospital was smart and accepted. A house designed by Dane Harcourt was worth its weight in gold as a symbol of status and luxury. If you had a Harcourt house, you had arrived.

As I walked up to the window in the Emergency Room, I saw Nick Sullivan leaning at the desk on the other side of the glass. When he turned to look out toward the lobby where I was standing, I raised my hand and waved. He came through the sliding glass doors seconds later.

"Hey," he smiled wide. "What're you doing here at the crack of dawn? Have you even been to bed yet?"

"Ha-ha," I smirked at him, yawning.

He stepped in close to me and took hold of the lapel of my peacoat. "Are we okay?"

"Yeah." I smiled at him. "Aren't we?"

"If I didn't care so much I wouldn't have been such a jerk."

"Then you must really care, 'cause you were a dick," I assured him.

He put an arm around my neck and led me through the doors to the ER. "What're you doing here J?"

"I have an envelope for the lady in charge of the silent auction tonight."

He gave me an odd look.

"Did you know there's a huge charity event tonight, Doctor, to raise money for the children's ward?"

"Yes, very funny. I know, I have to be there after all."

"So that's why I'm here. I need to see the lady in charge."

"Oh." He let me go. "Phyllis Dwyer. Let me call her down here for you."

"I can go to her office if you tell me where it is."

"No-no." He smiled at me. "I'll call her. Wait here."

So I stood there while he walked behind the desk to make a call.

"Jory, right?"

I looked up into lovely pale blue eyes. The woman smiling at me had the nicest face. "Yeah. Who're you?" I asked, leaning on the desk.

"I'm Colby St. James. I just transferred in from San Francisco."

"Why?" I asked her like she was high.

She chuckled. "My family's here."

I nodded. "So how're you liking it?"

"I like it, except that I got kind of a rude awakening last week when I discovered that the man I had my eye on actually has his eye on you."

"Oh," I smiled sheepishly. "Doctor Nick."

"Mmmm. The man is edible."

"Is he?" I teased her.

"Yes." She arched one eyebrow for me. "He's a great doctor, good with kids, funny, smart, sarcastic, and do I even need to add gorgeous? Have you not noticed those emerald eyes?"

I nodded. "You should do his PR for him."

She smiled impishly. "You're adorable. I get why he's smitten."

"Was smitten," I corrected her.

"Is smitten," she corrected me. "He told me what a jerk he was at the club. You know he's sorry."

"I know."

She tilted her head to look at me. "And have you forgiven him, Jory?"

I nodded. "I have."

She leaned forward to look into my eyes. "You know, I'm standing here looking at you and my goodness, you're even prettier than Doctor Nick."

I grinned at her.

"I would kill for your eyelashes."

"Jory."

I looked up and Nick was back. He looked from me to Colby and back again. "I called Phyllis. She'll be right down."

"What're you guys talking about?"

"Just trying to think of a good place to take Colby for a night on the town," I told him, straightening up, reaching out to fix his collar under his white lab coat. "Any suggestions?"

He froze under my touch; letting me smooth out his collar, tighten his tie.

"I dunno, J." He stared at me. "But after you give Phyllis the envelope, will you have breakfast with me? I'm just getting off, so—whaddya say?"

I squinted at him.

"Please." He smiled at me. "I've got stuff to say."

I shrugged. "All right."

"Great." He beamed at me. "I'll be right back."

Colby and I watched him walk away before we returned our gazes to one another.

"Wow," she chuckled, "I had no idea the man had it quite that bad."

"Knock it off," I teased her.

"Oh, Jory," Colby said suddenly and her voice had a breathy quality that had been missing before. "I Googled your boss and—is this him?"

I leaned over the desk and there on the Web site for Harcourt, Brown, and Cogan was the one and only Dane Harcourt. It was a particularly good shot. The photographer had been lying on the ground looking up at him, and it had been a cloudy day. So the sky and his eyes were the exact same color.

"It is a good picture, isn't it." I waggled my eyebrows at her.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at me. "You took it."

"I did," I chuckled. "Dane didn't like the guy that Miles and Sherman hired—thought he was arrogant—so since we had a deadline for the Web site... I got elected."

"It's a good picture, Jory, perhaps helped by the fact that his eyes look very kind. He obviously likes you if he's looking at you like that." She fixed me with a long stare. "Is he gay?"

I snorted out a laugh. "Uh, no. He's actually the exact opposite of gay—he's like the uber-straight guy."

"You mean—"

"I mean he's like a serial dater."

She giggled. "Maybe he just hasn't found the right girl yet."

"Maybe."

"Well," she swallowed. "I get how he can... date so much."

"Yep," I agreed. "Much prettier than Doctor Nick or me."

"Nothing pretty about that man," she said and I saw the bemused look in her eyes. "How tall is he?"

"He's six five."

"Oh."

"His eyes are gray."

"I can see that."

I chuckled and she looked up at me. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You're just evil." She smiled at me.

"Why don't you gimme your number and we can have lunch next week. I'll invite my boss."

She wrote it on a Post-it note for me without hesitation.

Phyllis Dwyer came down and collected the envelope from me, gave me a hug, and thanked me profusely. She said that she would love to meet my boss sometime. I told her I'd try to arrange that. She said she was sure the design plans would go for a higher price than the Lexus they had. I told her I wouldn't be surprised. A house by Dane Harcourt was one of a kind. I watched Colby's eyes widen just listening to me talk.

"He's a big deal," she said when Mrs. Dwyer left.

"A very big deal," I agreed as Nick came to stand beside me.

"C'mon, let's go." He smiled at me, hand on my back. "I know the perfect place."

* * * *

I had ducked into the bathroom when we got to the restaurant, leaving Nick alone to wait for the table. When I got out, he was standing beside the wall furthest from the door, and I stopped a minute and looked at him. Easy to see why I had been drawn to him; the thick, dark brown hair and dark green eyes were very appealing. He was tall with the long muscles of a swimmer, broad shoulders, and carried himself with unmistakable confidence. Not sexy and dangerous like Sam, more arrogant but kind at the same time, with that boy-next-door quality. It was weird, but when I first met him I'd thought he was handsome but really nothing special. After I spent more time with him though, upon closer inspection, I realized he was very handsome, and all at once he took my breath away. Like the more I saw him, the better-looking he got. And what really got me was the way he looked at me; always, he stared right into my eyes like I was the most amazing man he had ever seen. He saw me suddenly and he pushed away from the wall, straightened, and walked over to me. When he smiled he had those great lines in his face that I loved and his eyes sparkled. He liked me and it showed.

"Hey." I smiled up at him.

"The table's ready, c'mon."

I followed him to the hostess and then through the restaurant. It was nice to be warm on a cold, slushy morning with nothing to do but sit around. When we got to the booth I slid in first after hanging up my coat on the hook. He didn't pick another but instead hung his over mine. Funny.

"You know why I brought you here?" he asked me, looking up, smiling into my eyes.

"I have no idea."

"Because you like crepes and they have the best. Get whatever you want, it's on me."

"We can go Dutch." I smiled at him.

"No," he insisted. "I invited you—I'm dying to do something for you to... please, J."

I closed my menu and put it down on the table. "Why do you need to do anything for me? We're fine."

He searched my eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"If we're fine, why are you sitting so far away?" he prodded.

"I'm not. I'm right here."

"Why don't you slide over closer to me?"

I shook my head. "I'm good here."

"Come a little closer."

"Nick."

"Jory," he said gently, sliding over close to me. "I am so sorry for how I acted the night I was with my family, and then at the club with my friends. I just... I was completely out of line and the only excuse I can make is that I have never felt like this before and I'm not handling it well at all. I mean," he smiled faintly, gave me the slightest shrug. "I'm usually the person being

chased. I've never been on the other side before." He sighed, putting an arm around the back of the booth. "I gotta say, it kinda stinks."

"Does it?"

"Yeah," he nodded as the waiter put two large glasses of ice water down in front of us.

He ordered, and then me, and when I looked back at him he was scowling.

"What?"

"You have nothing to say?"

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"Yes, you do. I want you to say I can see you."

I looked into his eyes.

"I'm so sorry I embarrassed you."

"It's okay. I deserved it."

"You didn't deserve all that. Can you forgive me?"

"I already did," I told him honestly, smiling up at the waiter as he dropped off my smoky black tea and Nick's cappuccino. "God, I love oolong." I grinned over at him.

"It smells like sweat socks," he assured me, hand on the back of my neck, massaging the base of my skull, his fingers sliding over the groove.

I laughed and he smiled wide. Yeah, it did sort of smell like that. But it tasted like heaven.

"And so—talk. You were being chased and—"

"I can't talk about that."

"No?"

I shook my head.

"Okay then... I don't know what you did for Thanksgiving—fill me in," he ordered, taking a sip of his cappuccino and getting foam on his upper lip.

Without even a thought, I reached out and wiped it off with my fingers. "I'm sorry I didn't use the plane ticket and go skiing with you."

"It's okay, I got to see my family instead and that was good. Everything happens for a reason."

"I agree."

We were silent for a few minutes.

"You look great."

"Thanks." I smiled at him.

"Can I ask something?" He looked at me hard, his hand stroking up the back of my neck, his fingers in my hair.

"Course."

"Are you sleeping with that detective?"

"Yes," I answered without even having to think about it.

"I see. And you're staying with him?"

"No," I lied. It was none of his business.

He brightened. "No? Then where do you live, because I went by your old place but your landlord said you were gone."

"I live close to downtown now."

"Can I come see your new place?"

"Yeah, sure."

"When?"

"I dunno. Soon," I answered, leaning away from his hand.

"Sorry, I just like putting my hands on you. I know it's kinda lame."

"No." I smiled. "It's wonderful. The guy who you—"

"Don't," he warned me. "I don't wanna talk about the next guy, I wanna talk about you. Does the detective want you to be with him?"

I took a deep breath. "He's not sure what he wants."

"He's not out?"

"He's barely gay." I let out a long breath.

"Oh," he nodded, getting it. "You're his first."

"Yeah."

He tipped his head. "Well, I wish you had been my first."

"That's a very nice thing to say."

He ran the back of his fingers up my throat. "Your skin is amazing."

I just stared into his eyes.

"Can I just tell you that when you're with me I'm happy?"

"Thank you."

He gave me a crooked grin. "You think I'm crazy."

"I think you're a catch and I'm an idiot not to try and keep you."

He grunted. "Don't hafta try and do anything. You say the word, you can move in tomorrow."

"Why? You don't know anything about me."

"Yeah, but what I do know I'm crazy about. My feelings haven't changed," he said, hand on my cheek. "I want to be with you all the time. I want to go to bed with you and wake up with you and eat dinner with you every night and sleep with you—God, do I wanna sleep with you. It's like an ache I can't get rid of. You should have never let me in your bed if it was a one-time-only deal."

"Nick—"

"Stop. I know you don't feel the same. I'm not stupid."

"Nick—"

"No-no, I'm not looking for you to have to defend yourself."

"It's okay. I think it'll change in time."

In time? "Nick—"

"No, listen," he began, burying his hand in my hair, curling a long piece around my ear. "I know being in bed with me didn't rock your world or anything, but—"

"Oh God, you're being so honest right now," I groaned.

"Well, I'm thinking this is my last shot, and even though I'm calm, cool, and collected on the outside, inside I'm a little bit of a mess."

I bumped him gently with my shoulder and he leaned into me, his face in my hair.

"Jory, baby, I'm so sorry," he whispered, arm around my neck, pinning me against him.

"Stop saying that," I ordered him, closing my eyes, taking a breath. "It's okay. Honest."

"Okay." He let out a deep breath as I leaned away from him, lifting my mug. "So I told my family all about you. My sister Sarah, that you saw at the foosball table that night, isn't even speaking to me. She said that until she talks to you, I'm cut off. She can't believe I spoke to you that way."

"She sounds adorable."

"She's psychotic."

I laughed at him. "That's not a very nice thing to say."

"I just want you to promise to meet my family for Christmas. Everyone's coming back here. My Mom wants a white Christmas this year."

"Okay."

"Okay." He grinned, brushing my hair out of my face, his fingers trailing across my forehead. "Is that a commitment, Mr. Keyes?"

"Yes."

"Good," he breathed out. "Now start from the beginning and tell me why people are chasing you."

I chuckled. "I can't do that, I told you."

"Please."

"No—I'm being serious. It's scary and the less people that know about it the better."

"But the detective knows about it."

"Of course."

He nodded. "Okay, then tell me what you did for Thanksgiving."

"That I can do."

We ate and talked about nothing important. I told him I was going to set Colby up with Dane, and he thought that would make for interesting conversation for us down the road.

"So what now?" he asked me later as he pushed away his plate.

"How'dya mean?"

"What are your short-term plans, Mr. Keyes?"

"Well, for right now, I need to spend some time with Sam."

"Who?"

"The detective." I smiled at him.

"Oh. Is that his name? Sam?"

I chuckled, nodding.

"That's so boring."

"Knock it off."

"So you're going to be with him because how I feel about you—you feel about him."

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"We can still talk if you want. But I don't know if that's what you want."

"Is it all I can have?"

"Right now, yeah."

"Then it's what I want."

"Then we'll talk."

"Good."

An hour later, as we stood outside in front of the restaurant, I told him it had been a good idea to have breakfast. The company had been great and the meal was good.

"God, you're beautiful." He smiled lazily, his eyes glowing.

"Can I kiss ya?"

"Maybe you shouldn't," I stammered as he leaned close.

"Maybe I should," he said gently, his fingers warm on the side of my neck as he bent toward me.

I took a step back. "I don't sleep with one person and kiss somebody else. It's not me."

He stared at me hard. "I'll remember that when you're with me and won't worry that you'll cheat."

I shook my head. "You're amazing."

"This is what I've been saying."

I grabbed him, wrapping my arms around him, hugging him tight. "Thank you for how you feel, Nick. I'm humbled by it."

He trembled in my arms, burying his face in my shoulder as he clutched at my back, my hair, finding my bare skin as he nuzzled my coat collar with his nose. I felt his lips on the side of my neck.

"You know all this is because you don't think we have any chemistry," he said softly, seductively. "But I promise you, we do."

I tried to let him go but he was holding on too tight.

"I feel right when I hold you, and it's new for me."

I pulled free and looked up into his eyes.

He stared back at me for long minutes.

"Okay," I said, shoving my hands deep into my pockets, walking backwards, and heading for the curb to call a cab.

"I'll see ya, Nicky."

"If the detective screws up, J—you know who to call."

I nodded.

"And I still get to see your place and you did promise to meet my family."

I smiled wide. "Yes."

"And you won't blow me off."

"No."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Just making sure," he called over to me, lifting a hand before he turned away, walking down the street.

I wondered for a second if I would ever see him again.

* * * *

It was after seven when Sam came into the apartment and closed and locked the door behind him.

"Hi," I called over to him from where I was reading on the couch.

He pulled off his trench coat and threw it on the chair. His keys were dropped on the coffee table as he crossed the room to me.

"Are you okay?"

"No," he said, reaching me. "It smells great in here."

I put the magazine down and looked up at him. "How was work, honey?"

"It was shit," he chuckled, grabbing my right thigh, yanking me around, forcing me to my back so he could lie down on top of me, between my legs.

"I'm sorry," I told him as he bent and kissed me. It was possessive and hot and devouring. What it lacked was the urgency that was usual with us. He was taking his time, kissing me slowly, deeply, like he had all the time in the world. When I whimpered, he smiled against my mouth.

"I'm so glad to see you."

I wrapped my legs around his waist and he pressed against me as he kissed me long and hard. I was getting dizzy, it felt so good.

"Why don't you go take a shower or a hot bath and relax?"

"The shower I'll do," he said, pulling back from me. "But I wanna talk to you, so I'll make it fast."

"You can talk to me in the tub," I assured him, panting, trying to catch my breath. "I'll run the bath and you can sit in it."

"No thanks." He shook his head before he put his fingers under my chin and tilted my head up. "I just wanna sit and eat with you."

"Okay."

"Do you have any alcohol in your arsenal?"

"Yessir." My mouth was dry and I was barely breathing.

He nodded, leaned in and kissed me again. His tongue tangled with mine as a hand slipped under my shirt to slowly rub my stomach. "I bet you taste better than the food."

I couldn't speak. He annihilated me. His fingers stroking, petting me made my brain shut down.

"I'm gonna take a shower. I'll be right back."

"Okay" I said before he kissed my forehead and rose off me. I sat up and watched him walk out of the room, down the hall to his bedroom.

After I calmed a minute, I got up to get his dinner. When he came back in the kitchen a little while later, he looked better. He had on a long T-shirt under a short one, jeans, and thick sweat socks. His hair was still wet and was sticking up in places. He could not have been any more adorable.

I fed him lobster bisque, linguine and clams, fresh French bread, spinach salad with vinegar and oil dressing, and poured him many glasses of the Chardonnay that the guy at the wine store had said was good. I told him all about breakfast with Nick, walking around the bookstore afterward, the Christmas shopping I had started for Dane's friends, and the million places I had gone to get dinner.

"You had breakfast with the doctor?"

"Yes."

"And what'd he say when you told him you were gonna stay with me?"

"I just told him I had to see where this thing with you was gonna go."

He nodded. "You didn't tell him we were dating?"

"Is that what we're doing?"

"I dunno."

"We're just sort of hanging out, right?"

"We're doin' more than that."

"Are we?"

We shared a long look before I smiled wide.

"J—"

"I packed a bag like you asked. Tomorrow morning I'll split so you can have some time to yourself, but for now let's just say we—"

He reached across the table and put a hand over mine.

"Stop talking."

I grinned at him. "Okay."

After a few minutes he said my name, and when I looked up he was leaning his chin on his hand.

"What?"

"I can't let you go home."

I stared into his smoky blue eyes. "Oh no?"

"No."

"Eat your salad," I ordered him.

"Yes, baby."

When I got up to do the dishes he helped me clear the table. He dried everything I washed and put the dishes away.

While I was replacing the vase full of wildflowers on his dining table, he walked back in from taking out the garbage. He was on the phone, and as far as I could tell he was agreeing to something.

"So?" I asked as soon as he hung up.

"I completely forgot that tonight is Dom's birthday.

Everyone is at his place already."

"Oh." I nodded. "Then you should go."

"You gotta come with me."

My stomach rolled over. "No."

"Yes."

"It's not a good idea."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's really not."

"J—"

"Sam—"

"Get your coat, J, we're leaving now."

"Maybe you should—"

"I can carry you out if you like."

And from the furrowed brows I got I realized he was serious. Funny that I wanted to meet his friends, but now I was terrified. Reality was always different than you imagined.

* * * *

I stood on the sidewalk looking at the house a minute before I turned and looked at Sam.

"What?"

"Are you kidding?"

"What?"

"This is your friend's house?" I was stunned.

"Yeah, I know. It looks fancy, right?"

Fancy was an understatement.

"Dom's wife passed, like I told ya, and her folks helped him buy it. I guess it was something she had asked them to do in the letter she left, take care of him and stuff. His wife wanted him to have a home. Her folks still help him out from time to time, send him money, gifts, and it makes sense, ya know? I mean, if you think about it, he's all they've really got left of their daughter."

His logic seemed flawed. "Her parents must be loaded, Sam."

"Not really, but between what they kicked in and some smart investments that Dom made, there was enough for the house."

He had no idea what he was talking about. He didn't know what houses cost, I did. There was no way any good investing and money kicked in from well-meaning in-laws yielded a house like the one I was walking into. From stairs that led up to a now dormant garden, to the glass front door, the huge bay window that faced the street, the sunken living room, the enormous rooms, the full bar, the deck in back, it was a showpiece and not one that a man on a detective salary could afford. I had snooped and looked at Sam's pay stubs and I knew that he and Dominic Kairov were both detectives at the same grade. I had to wonder in what ways Dominic was feathering his nest that the others were not, but I was not comfortable asking Sam for those answers. What he wanted to share about his partner I was more than happy to hear, but I got the feeling that probing was out of the question.

Dominic, or Dom, Kairov had been with Sam since their police academy days. They were assigned to the same precinct after graduation and had been through times good and bad. Good being when they had both made detective at thirty-one, and bad when Dominic's wife had committed suicide two years ago. Her parents, Sam had confided to me, had blamed him not for the act itself but for the depression that drove her to it. Between his long absences, infidelity, and emotional distance, he had been the opposite of a model husband, so I was surprised to hear that they had sprung for half of a million-dollar mortgage. It made no sense, and Sam should have noticed, but no one, including Sam, questioned how Dominic was living because his wife was dead. If he said her family had helped him out, given him gifts, then it must have been true. I knew Sam believed Dominic; the man was, after all, his partner, brother and friend.

As I followed Sam through the house he was stopped over and over by people wanting to talk to him. He did a lot of handshaking, hugging men and kissing women. I was introduced as simply Jory but he kept me close, his hand on the back of my neck as he steered me in front of him through the house. On the back deck, sitting by the fireplace, were Sam's closest friends, the detectives he worked with day in and day out. Dominic was the first to his feet, pulling Sam close for the guy clench before shoving him away.

"Oh, you brought the witness." He smiled at me before turning to Sam. "That's what the safe house is for, buddy," he teased his friend. "Did you miss the memo?"

Sam smirked at him as he groaned that he needed a drink.

Dominic nodded, draped an arm around his shoulders, and led him away. He called back over his shoulder that I could follow them to the bar. I was not asked if I wanted anything because I was not, relatively speaking, Sam's date. I could fend for myself like any of the other guys. I watched them go before turning around to survey the room. I knew no one, I had not been invited, and I had just been abandoned. It was shaping up to be a great night.

I wandered around looking at the expensive artwork, Baccarat crystal goblets on the set table in the dining room, and the lavish furnishings. There were rugs that cost more than my rent, and again I wondered how Dominic Kairov managed it. As I sat down on the stairs beside some women lounging in a small area of the living room, I overheard Sam's name.

"So who's that girl with Sam and Dom?" one of them asked.

Another snickered. "That's the girl Dominic set Sam up with on the double date, remember?"

"Oh, that's right," first girl said. "She was nice. Her name's Maggie something."

"Yeah-yeah, Maggie, that's right. Maggie Dixon."

"So our Sam's been on two dates with her?" First girl arched one perfectly waxed brow. "Well, that's one more than usual."

"She's cute," another girl chimed in. "What's she do?"

"I think she teaches school. Third or fourth grade, I think."

"Awww, a school teacher for Sammy? How cute is that?"

"Look at them, they're adorable together."

Margaret Dixon was a curvy, petite brunette with deep dimples and big brown eyes. She had a great laugh, warm demeanor, and was, by all accounts, very likable. She was one of those touchy-feely people, so she basically had her hands all over Sam, but it was charming instead of flirty or bold. Her hair curled down to the middle of her back, she actually had that peaches and cream complexion you always heard about but never saw in real life, and the hourglass figure was being well served by the tight jeans and low-cut wrap shirt. She was the kind of girl men lined up for. She was Sam's type, the girls assured one another, and watching them together it was hard not to concede.

He seemed at ease with Maggie. His eyes were soft when he looked at her and when he bent over her to show her how to hold the pool cue, the girls all did the *aww* in harmony. I watched him get her a drink, let her feed him the cherry, and then give her the stem he had tied with his tongue. Some comment was made because Maggie flushed a very becoming shade of pink and Sam arched one eyebrow and smiled wickedly. The howls of laughter from the table made everyone look. I was ready to go. I slunk off toward the kitchen to see if there was any bottled water anywhere.

The music got louder as the night wore on but it wasn't quite as pounding on the second floor. I found a sitting room between two bedrooms that was quiet and filled with back issues of *Architectural Digest*. I found one with a photo spread of Dane from ten years back and had a good laugh over his clothes as well as his hair. I took a picture of it with my phone and sent my boss a text message, asking him what had been going on with him in the nineties. When my phone rang, I expected it.

"Don't you have anything better to do than annoy me?" he asked irritably.

"No."

"Why not?"

I explained about what I was doing and where I was and I was instantly sorry. He was really not pleased with my decision to spend time with Sam, and wondered how I could be sitting in someone's house pretending to be something I wasn't. I told him it was my life and he promptly corrected me. Since I spent more hours with him, at work, than anywhere else, it was technically his life, and as such he had a say in where and with whom I spent the remainder of my time.

"I just want to be with him," I defended myself.

"Great. Are you?"

There was no argument for that.

"So is this detective's home nice?" He was changing the subject. It was really decent of him.

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Yes," I repeated, rolling my eyes. "It's actually a little too nice."

"Explain that."

"I think this might be one of Peter Armand's designs."

He snorted. "I very much doubt that someone your detective knows is living in an Armand house."

"Exactly."

"Go out front and take a picture and I'll be able to tell you."

"Okay. Call me back."

"I will." He yawned and hung up.

I went downstairs and out through the front door. When I was across the street I lifted my phone to take a picture. I heard the squeal of tires as soon as I finished sending the shot to Dane.

There were two black Hummers and they spilled out people into the street. I walked backwards as I watched the men take the stairs, kick open the front door, and pour inside. The screams were audible all the way out to the street as the music abruptly cut off. I heard firecrackers going off inside along with the lightning show. I sunk down behind the Lexus beside me and called 911.

I told the operator that I was at the home of a police detective and I was clear and concise as I gave the address and read her off both license plates from each Hummer. They had left no one in either car, so I snuck up to the closest one and grabbed the keys. Almost to the second, I heard someone scream Dominic's name. No mistake about who they were there to see. At least I was outside where I could help.

All I could think about was saving Sam, even though I hated him. I hit the horn and when three of the guys appeared at the bay window, I waved from the Hummer before I got in. I locked the doors, started the car, and was expecting a ferocious burst of speed but got only a slow crawl. Glass exploded around me as the windows were shot out and the car was blasted with bullets. The moving rule applied though, and as I picked up speed traveling down the slight hill, I heard the wail of sirens. I managed to turn off the main road as a wall of police cars streaked past me; I counted ten in all and continued on, taking every side street I could find. Not that anyone was after me, but a bullet-ridden car would stand out. And I wondered at myself that I was more mad than scared. Flying lead should have been horrifying, but all I kept seeing, the thing that kept popping back into my head, was the way Sam had been looking at Maggie. I wanted him to look at me what way.

I drove to his apartment and grabbed my stuff because I didn't want to come between him and the promise of his happily-ever-after. He obviously found Maggie Dixon charming and he deserved the chance to see where it would

go without having to worry about me. She was probably the reason he had insisted on going to Dominic's party in the first place. Sam was not the type to do anything he didn't want to, so going must have had more to do with her presence than anything else. Lost in my thoughts, when I finally looked at my phone I realized I had twenty missed calls. I hadn't even heard the insistent ringing.

"Jory?" Sam said quickly, answering on the first ring. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." I shivered, but not from cold. The Hummer had heated seats. "Are you okay? You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"No, I didn't get hurt! Jesus Christ, what the hell were you doing with that fuckin' stunt?"

"It got them out of the house, didn't it?"

"Jory! Where the hell are you?"

"I have no idea," I said, leaning forward, trying to read a street sign. "But I think I'm near Midway."

"Jory, goddamn it! Pull the fuck over and wait for me. I—"

"You know, Sam, it's not a good idea. I went by your place and got my stuff. I—"

"You what?"

"I think I made a mistake and we both know you think you did."

"I have no idea what you're—"

"Watching you flirt with Maggie Dixon all night doesn't top my list of fun things to do."

"Jory! God, nobody makes me as crazy as you! I have no idea how you've lived this long!"

I grunted, waving at the other car in the intersection that I had nearly run into. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing, which was dangerous when you were piloting the *Enterprise*. I leaned out the window to yell over to them.

"Sorry, big car—didn't see ya! My bad."

"Jory!"

Shit. Sam. I moved the phone back to where I could talk into it. "So I think maybe I should just let you get on with your life and—"

"Jory—Jory—"

New voice, calmer voice, a little deeper. "Jory."

"Yes?"

"Jory, this is Dominic. Where are you, buddy?"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Where are you?"

"Was anybody hurt?"

"Jory, you—"

"I called the police for you."

"I know you did, buddy and I—we all appreciate it, but—"

"You're sure you're okay?"

"Jory... buddy... you're in shock, aren't ya?"

"What? Why?"

He sighed deeply. "Jory, you saved all our lives. God knows what would've happened if you hadn't done what you did. But you got them away from everybody and... and shit.

First you called for backup like a fuckin' pro and got every single one of those fuckers arrested. That was amazing, and you—you need to let Sammy and me come get you so we can get you back to his place."

"I don't think that's gonna work."

"Why not?"

"It just won't."

"Well then, we'll put you in a safe house where—"

"Maybe I should go away, huh?"

"No-no-no, Jory, just—"

"I don't mean I wouldn't testify. I would make sure I—oh shit, hold on," I told him, clicking over to talk to Dane. "Hey."

"That is an Armand house. How in the world does someone on a policeman's sal—"

"I can't talk now."

"Why not?"

"I'm kind of in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"You'd never believe me."

"Oh I'm sure I would believe you. Are you still at the detective's friend's house?"

"No."

"Then where are you?"

"I'm not exactly sure." I stalled him.

"You're stalling. Tell me."

So I explained about the Hummer and the bullets in it and how I was driving it around. When I finished there was only silence on his end.

"Dane?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

He cleared his throat. "I'm at the Valentine Lounge downtown. I want you here in twenty minutes."

"No."

"No?"

"Boss—"

"Dane," he corrected me.

"Oh yeah," I nodded to myself. "Sorry."

"Jory, I want you here."

"But what am I gonna do with the Hummer?"

"Park it somewhere." He took a breath. "Anywhere."

"You should've seen the guns and stuff. It was mad scary."

"Was it?" he said flatly. "Mad scary."

"Yeah." I sighed because I was crashing, my adrenaline just draining from my body, and his voice on the other end of the line sounded like home for some reason. I was delirious.

"Listen, Jory," he said, letting out a deep breath. "I need to talk to you about something so I need you to come see me. Don't make me wait."

I turned my phone all the way off so Sam couldn't find me, and drove to see Dane. I wondered vaguely when my life was going to even out. Any time would be good.

* * * *

I ditched the Hummer in a vacant lot and my clothes and things at the train terminal—I used three lockers—before I went to meet Dane at the Valentine Lounge. It was a very chic cocktail lounge that played mostly bossa nova, very martini with olive kind of place. I had been once before on a date with Rafael Soto. He liked to dress me up and take me out, show me off and then drive me home. After the third date where he wouldn't even touch me because he didn't want me to wrinkle, I told him to get lost. What I had found charming and slow-moving had actually been run-of-the-mill crazy. But I knew where the lounge was because of it, so everything did in fact always happen for a reason. Sometimes it took a long time to figure out the why.

Dane was sitting almost in the middle of the place on a couch surrounded by people. They were his friends, but there were two women I didn't know, one on either side of him.

When he saw me, he made the gesture with his hand for me to hurry and I moved as fast as I could. I felt stupid standing there with my hands shoved down in the pockets of my jeans, looking kind of out of it, I was sure. He stood and grabbed a handful of the front of my shirt and tugged me forward into his arms. I went stiff because he never hugged me, but the hand in my hair holding me against him, the other rubbing circles on my back was too much. I shivered hard and wrapped my arms around his waist. He gave me a last hard squeeze and pushed me out to look me over.

"Dane?" one of the women asked. "Who's—"

"That's his brother Jory," Jude offered and I turned to look at him.

He smiled and nodded and I looked up into Dane's eyes.

"This is what we're going to talk about," he said gruffly, hand on the back of my neck as he led me a few feet away from the others. When he turned, both hands went to my shoulders. "I was going to have a long talk with you in the office, but for one, you might not make it to Monday at the rate you're going so I have to step in now, and two, there's no formality between us anymore so I might as well tell you my plan here at the Valentine Lounge."

I was silent, waiting.

"Jory, we're going to change your last name from Keyes to Harcourt, I'm going to make you the beneficiary of my estate, and you're going to have access to a lot of things you don't have now."

I was silent and he just stared into my eyes. "What?" I said finally.

"I'm not adopting you, I'm not taking care of you... you still have to work and make your own way and everything else, but you don't need the last name Keyes and you don't need to say no to me."

"I can't live with you or off of you or—"

"Who's asking you to? I wouldn't live with you on a bet,"

he snapped at me. "You'd be dead in a week for real because I'd throw you off the balcony of my place."

"But—"

"And by the way, you're fired."

I was stunned as I stared up at him.

"Your eyes are huge," he chuckled.

"You can't fire me."

"Oh no?"

"But—"

"Just... be still."

I went silent and waited.

He took a deep breath. "You've worked for me for five years, and in that time you've gone from my assistant to my friend, to the person I imagine in my life always. And I can say all that because you being gay has nothing whatsoever to do with me. I want to take care of you, but being in bed with you is not my idea of fun. You're simply the brother I never had and the one I want to keep. And for that reason, I can't work with you. I got you an interview Monday morning at nine, at Barrington with David O'Shea, for a position in their graphic design department. It's very entry level and you're going to make less than you do now, so if you run short you come hit me up for a loan that you'll have to pay back. That's what family does. You can keep your AMEX too. It's got your name on it already."

"Dane, I—"

"That's what got me thinking about all this. That day we went to Macy's and I was getting my card out and you paid with yours. I thought, he's got a credit card that I pay for with his name on it. And I know it's just for work, but still, it's like we're attached somehow." He sighed and stared into my eyes. "I thought, this is how I want it to be. I don't just want to run your life at work, I want a say in it all the time. And even as a friend, I don't have enough power... so I started to think and this is what I came up with. You're going to be my brother."

"You can't just—"

"I spoke to my lawyer," he nodded. "I can do it all.

Tomorrow morning you sign papers with me at brunch, which we'll have together with my lawyer, and you'll go from Jory Keyes to Jory Harcourt. You need to get a new driver's license and a new Social Security card, but other than that, it's done.

Jory Keyes will cease and Jory Harcourt will begin."

"I don't wanna be a—"

"Yes, you do—"

"I don't mean I don't wanna be a Harcourt, I don't wanna be a graphic—"

"Yes you do."

"No, I don't!"

"Yes... you do. I know you do. I watch you. And being my assistant is not fulfilling. You need a career, not a job, and this way you get to keep me and find the job of your dreams.

We both know the only reason you haven't left is because you were worried about losing me. Worry solved."

"Could you be any more conceited?"

"How so?"

"You think the only reason I stay is to be close to you?"

"Yes. I know it is. You think if you leave I'll disappear from your life."

I just looked at him.

"I won't."

I cleared my throat. "Who are you going to get to be your assistant?"

"I hired a wonderful woman this morning. She's older than me and seems very warm and extremely professional. I liked her the minute I met her."

I looked at him. "You replaced me."

"I hired a new assistant, I'm keeping you."

I tried to wrap my brain around everything he'd just said.

"For starters, that place you live... from now on you make the payments to yourself. You're buying it from me. Once you own it, you can sell it or do whatever."

It was hard. I wasn't a charity case. "I don't deserve all this."

"You deserve every bit of it," he said solemnly. "And who's to say what a person deserves or doesn't? We fit together and I want you to be my family. It doesn't have to be a big deal."

We're still us, you're still you—you just have me now to look out for you."

I scowled at him. "You wanna run my life."

"I thought that's what I've been saying."

My mind was racing. "How can you just give me your name?"

"I was adopted and got my name. My parents are gone, you know that, and there was only my father, he had no brothers or sisters and his parents both passed before I was even born. There is no other Harcourt that I'm related to, so there's just going to be me... and now you. We'll make our own history."

I stared up into the gray eyes I knew so well. Funny that earlier I was thinking he was home. Turned out he really was.

"And I will get married one of these days and you'll stand up there with me. After I have children, you'll be an uncle and come every Thanksgiving and Christmas and have dinner with your family on Sunday nights. You'll bring your partner along with you and someday, I'm sure... kids of your own."

The air had been sucked from the room and I felt my heart pounding in my chest.

"This is what I want." He smiled down at me, hand on the side of my neck. "Okay?"

I couldn't speak.

He let out a quick breath. "This one time," he whispered hoarsely and I saw the muscles in his jaw working as he pressed his lips together. "I want you to be my brother. I—

you know. I want you to stay. Just agree."

All at once I understood, and the simplicity of it was staggering. He loved me. He couldn't say it because the words were too much, they would weigh too much between us, but I saw it there in the steady gaze, felt it in the warmth of the hand on my cheek, and heard it in the way he was holding his breath. Waiting for me. He would wait forever if I asked. I nodded because I couldn't speak.

His arm slipped around my neck as he drew me close, hugging me tight, his chin resting on the top of my head as he thanked me.

"I should thank you," I croaked out.

"No," he said, shoving me away. "Let's go."

"Where are we—"

"I'm taking you home to my place. I don't trust you to be safe anywhere else."

"But you don't hafta leave all your—"

"Where are all your things?"

I explained about the train terminal.

Hand on the back of my neck. "Let's go and get your stuff.

You're crashing hard, you're barely standing."

"That's not...." I began even as I almost tripped over my own feet. "Shit."

He chuckled as he steered me back to the others. When he announced that he had to leave—family emergency—the delight in his tone was not to be missed. His friend Jude smiled at me and I was congratulated on a choice well made.

* * * *

Dane lived in a very exclusive building, downtown close to the water tower. There was a security guard that sat behind the desk when you came in and another who hung out by the elevators. They were medium-sized guys, really nice, nothing menacing about them, which was somehow spookier than if they had been big and scary. You got the idea that they could become menacing very quickly. The fact that they were both packing didn't change the image. If you tried to hurt someone in Dane's building you could be shot. It had to be comforting for the residents even if it gave visitors the willies. That was probably the whole point.

Inside Dane's apartment were two floors. The bottom was a giant room where the living room, dining room, and kitchen all sort of blended together. The steel staircase rose from the first floor to the second and his office, bedroom and bathroom, two guest bedrooms and one bathroom were there. He had a sunroom where the pool and sauna were that led out onto the balcony that faced Lake Michigan. On the first floor was another balcony that looked out in the other direction, toward the city. It was a dazzling place to live, and even more exciting that he could simply come

down in his elevator and be downtown where all the night life and shopping was. I had always loved it and got really excited when he went out of town and I got to house-sit. As I stood in the living room looking out at the balcony, he walked by and passed me a set of keys and the card for the elevator.

"I have a set of keys for your place," he assured me, yawning as he climbed the stairs to the second floor. "I'm going to make up the other bedroom for you. Just give me a minute."

He was freaking me out by acting like everything was normal. And to him it probably was. Because my new status was his decision, he had been given the time to work through it in his mind. I was the one who had woken up in the Twilight Zone. When my phone rang, I answered it without even checking the number.

"Jory."

"Hey." I sighed. "You all right, Sam?"

"Tell me where you are."

I flopped down onto the leather couch. "I'm safe, don't worry."

"How do I not worry? I—"

"Sam," I said softly. "Have you noticed that we catch a break and then split apart again?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean we have these moments of bliss followed by total shit." I was weary and I could hear it in my voice. "It's exhausting, isn't it?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not *trying* to say anything, I'm telling you straight up.

You are not ready for me."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I saw you with that girl, Sam. I saw how you were looking at her. You can't lie now and tell me you weren't interested in her. I watched you. Maggie Dixon interests you."

"So what?"

There was no denial, only the defensive retort. I'd hit a nerve. "So go with it—see where it leads."

"You think I need your permission, you cocky piece of shit?"

"I think what you said that night in the car was all true.

You want what your parents have but you wanna be in bed with me. You can't have both."

"You don't get to say what I can or cannot have."

"I know, but we keep doin' this and the outcome never changes. We shatter at the first hint of trouble."

"We don't shatter, you run. You always run."

"I don't fit in your life, Sam. You left me tonight at the party because it would've looked weird if you kept me with you. Maggie fits perfect. I don't."

"You don't know anything."

"Deny that you abandoned me."

"Jory, it was Dom's birthday—it was about him, not you."

"So wanting you with me or wanting you to include me, that was just selfish on my part."

"Why couldn't you have mingled with my friends?"

"Why couldn't you have kept me with you?"

"I'm supposed to do what, hold your hand all night?"

"I didn't expect that... I just expected to be included."

"You are incapable of thinking about anyone else but yourself."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

We were talking in circles. I thought he was wrong, he thought I was wrong, there was no middle ground, no understanding that we were going to reach.

"Are you going to tell Dom about me, Sam?"

"You said you'd wait for me to—"

"C'mon, be honest, you can't and you know it. Your life doesn't work with a partner, it only works with a wife. Why fight it?" I waited only seconds for a response. "Your folks are gonna love Maggie."

"You know, Jory, it's funny that you think you of all people can know what's good for me. You can't even take care of yourself but you think you know what's best for me."

"Deny any of it."

"I think maybe it's a good thing that you go. You obviously know nothing about sticking it out through the hard times."

You run at the first sign of trouble. You're a quitter and you should know that about yourself."

"Only if there really is no way to win." I sighed deeply.

"You can't fool yourself into thinking things are gonna work out when the facts are right in front of you."

"You're really stupid."

"Okay."

"It's gonna be done this time, you know? I can't keep running after you."

"Sure," I said as my eyes filled. "I know."

"Do you even care?"

I cared more than I could even express. I had never, ever been crazier about anyone else. Sam Kage was the man of my dreams; it was too bad that being with him always became a nightmare.

"Take care," he said and hung up.

I fell sideways onto the couch. I would mourn him and our affair over breakfast. I was just too tired at that moment. I couldn't keep my eyes open. I didn't remember going to bed.

Chapter Four

I hit the button to speak, but before I could even say who I was the buzzer on the door went off and I went through it to the lobby.

"Jory!" she squealed loudly.

I lifted my eyes and there, four flights up, was my friend, and work partner, Dylan Greer, waving at me like crazy.

"Hurry up, I want you to meet everybody!"

I climbed the stairs as fast as I could, unwrapping my scarf as I moved. When I hit her floor, she ran from her door to reach me and I caught her when she leaped at me and carried her to her door, her arms and legs wrapped around me.

"You came." She smiled into my eyes, smoothing her fingers over my eyebrows.

"I said I would."

"I know." She sighed as I carried her through the open door, depositing her in the hallway of her apartment. "But I've invited you a million times before."

"And this time I could actually make it," I assured her.

She nodded. "Gimme your coat. What do you want to drink?"

"What've you got?" I asked as I passed her first my coat and then the wine I had brought her.

"Oh thank you, sir." She smiled at me, taking my hand, tugging me into the living room. "How 'bout a very strong margarita?"

"Okay." I grinned at her, brushing the hair out her eyes. "I love your face."

I watched her tremble under my hand, as always, a grateful recipient of my attention. She wore her adoration of me on her sleeve, where I showed off mine for her. "Well, I like yours a little bit too, ya know?"

We shared a long look before there was throat-clearing close by. We both turned to the man smiling at us.

"You've gotta be Jory." His smile widened as he extended his hand. "I'm Chris, her husband."

I took the hand and returned the smile. "It's great to finally meet you."

"And you," he nodded, reaching out to squeeze my shoulder. "She talks about you every day."

"Sorry," I said, shooting her a look.

"What?" Her dark scowl was adorable.

"No," he chuckled. "It's good, really. She loves working with you."

I wrapped my arms around her neck and pressed against her back. "Well, it goes both ways."

They were listening to oldies and when a new song started she drew me away from her husband to the area behind the couch. I took her into my arms and she put her head on my shoulder and leaned. As I moved, I heard her sigh, and she melted against me. When the song ended and I dipped her low, the room erupted in applause.

My head snapped up and I realized there were seven other people there besides us.

"Everybody," she chuckled as she looked at all of them upside-down. "This is my partner in crime, my work-husband, Jory."

I smiled and she giggled. When I looked down at her she was staring up into my face. "Let me up so you can meet my friends."

As soon as I set her on her feet, she grabbed the front of my sweater and pulled me around to the center of the group next to the coffee table. There was a board game set up. I didn't groan out loud, which I was very proud of.

Her friends were very nice and when I was asked what it was like to have Dylan Greer as a partner, I leaned on her and said that from the moment we were introduced it had been heaven. When she turned to look at me, I smiled wide.

Her hand was on my cheek and I heard the laughter around us.

My interview with first David O'Shea and then his boss Philip Torres at Barrington had gone way better than good. He needed a new graphic designer but he needed one that could work with a partner to develop branding for new clients. We had to create logos, develop artwork, and create print material. I was assigned to the production department after I was hired, starting at the bottom of the barrel with someone from concept design. We worked together after sitting in on a client meeting and came up with something iconic for them to look at. It was usually a group setting, where the client was introduced to everyone. There were four teams that did this part of the PR process at Barrington and we were one of them. When I had been walked through the department on the following Tuesday after I'd been hired, it was then that I had caught my first glimpse of Dylan Greer.

She was sitting at her desk alone, and everyone else in the production room was clustered around another desk talking to one another. Miguel Ortiz, who had been my tour guide, led me over to her desk. He knocked on it to get her attention, as she was facedown on the drafting table. She rolled her head instead of sitting up and his exasperated sigh was not to be missed.

"Greer, this is Harcourt," he grumbled at her. "Your new partner. Try not to run this one off."

And with that he squeezed my shoulder and left. He had given me the good luck speech on the way down. Apparently Dylan was extremely gifted, extremely moody, and sometimes violent. Her last partner had gotten a stapler launched at his head. He didn't quit, however, until she laughed at him, long and hard and loud, in the middle of a client meeting. The only reason she was still there and not instantly fired was that the client had thought the idea just as ridiculous as she had. When she had walked her own sketches up to the table and explained her intent, the client had agreed to the concept on the spot. She was, after all, brilliant but manic. I liked her instantly.

As she lifted her head up off the table and looked into my eyes I arched a brow for her. The smile was adorable. Her tiny little heart-shaped mouth and huge black eyes made her look like a character from a graphic novel—some lovely piece of manga. The porcelain skin and jet-black, midnight-blue-highlighted hair added to the impression.

"You don't look like a Greer," I said to her.

"Do I look like an Okamoto?" she asked crisply.

"Yes."

"You don't look like a Harcourt," she volleyed back. "It's kinda snooty."

I shrugged. No one new that I met would ever know I had ever been anything but a Harcourt. Jory Keyes was dead and he wasn't coming back, even for an explanation. "Well, I'm kind of stuck up myself. You know the type, conceited asshole."

She eyed me hard. "You look okay to me."

I smiled wide. "You look okay to me too."

She offered me her hand. "Call me Dy."

I leaned in and hugged her tight. "Call me J."

Her arms wrapped instantly around me and she put her head down on my shoulder. We went and hid in the supply closet so no one would see her cry. She didn't want to be a bitch, but she liked everything done a certain way, the right way, and so the whole department hated her for insisting on quality instead of quantity. I assured her I didn't, couldn't ever hate her, and we went from there. By the time we got back to her desk, we were a team, and a pretty formidable one as the weeks progressed.

We clicked in some invisible way that taught me to trust my instincts and her to explore her limits. She didn't have to worry about me keeping up with her or being jealous of her or stabbing her in the back—her only concern was the work. And I, who was unsure if I could even do the job, came to the realization that I had the ability, as she nurtured my talent from potential to possibility to fruition.

Our ideas bounced off each other and sometimes the walls.

She drew on any surface that was handy, and when the others complained, Gloria Todd, the head of our department, moved us off the main floor and into a tiny cubbyhole of a corner office. Dylan papered one side of the room, tearing it down and taping it back up every morning. Where she was fevered and driven and frantic I was calm and soothing and still. She said I was like water to her flame but instead of drowning her I just kept her even. We fit like puzzle pieces and were both noticed and complimented. It didn't even bother me that Dane had been right. I liked my new job, my new life. I liked being Jory Harcourt.

Dylan had been pressuring me for two months to meet her husband and she wanted to meet the *somebody special* in my life. Since there was no one, as I was taking a long hiatus from dating, I asked her if my brother would suffice. She was happier with that and so had arranged a small dinner party with two other couples, her best friends that she wanted me to meet, her husband and one of his co-workers that she was crazy about. I knew before the words were out of her mouth that she was playing matchmaker, but she was my friend and wanted what was best for me, so I agreed to meet

Raymond Alvarez, along with everyone else, at her house on Saturday night.

At a quarter to nine neither Dane nor Ray was there and Dylan, true to form, went ahead and served dinner. She had no patience whatsoever and waiting to serve food was not where she was going to start. We ate from a buffet line on her counter and sat around in the living room. When the doorbell chimed after we all had gotten settled, Chris rose to get it, gentle hand on his wife's knee to keep her seated. I was not surprised that it was Dane. Funny to see him there in his Armani tuxedo looking like he had literally stepped off the cover of *GQ*. He was stunning.

"Oh my goodness," Dylan breathed out, her eyes running over the man slowly, up and down, finally settling on his face, on his pale gray eyes under perfectly shaped thick black brows. "Are you Dane?"

"I am." He smiled at her, passing her the bottle of Dom Perignon. "I'm sorry to be late. I forgot I had to put in an appearance at a charity function this evening, but I didn't want you to think for a moment that meeting Jory's partner wasn't of paramount importance to me. So I brought you a gift and I'm hoping that perhaps we might have dinner with you and your husband next week sometime if that would work."

She could only nod. He was giving her his full attention and it was short-circuiting her brain. "That would work. That would be great."

"Excellent." He smiled at her before he offered Chris his hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

He was spellbound as well. "And you," he said as he shook Dane's hand.

I watched Dane meet the others, shake their hands, smile until the room was silent, watching, waiting on him. I got up and he stepped in front of me, hand on my shoulder.

"How are you?"

I smiled up at him. "I'm good. Are we still on for brunch tomorrow?" It had become our Sunday morning ritual after the first-time meeting with the lawyer.

"Sure. Let's hit the gym first. I have to beat Jude at racquetball this week or I owe him like a car or something, and even though annihilating you isn't much practice, at least it gets my blood moving."

I chuckled. "Funny. You're frickin' hilarious."

He grinned before patting my cheek gently, turning to go.

"Don't forget we've got to go through applications sometime tomorrow. I've got to start interviewing next week."

"How many assistants is that in the two months that I've been gone?"

He smirked at me. "Just shut up."

"Carina then Debbie and last Friday you fired Shannon right?" I teased him.

"Keep it up."

I nodded, looking down before my eyes were suddenly back on his. "Say it."

"What?"

I squinted at him. "C'mon, just say it."

He gave me a long look before he suddenly sighed. "Fine, you're right. You were the best assistant I ever had. You took care of me at work, at home, you were phenomenal. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Yes."

"You know you're amazing, I should tell you more often."

It was all I needed to hear.

"Here," he said as he passed me something.

When I looked at what was in my hand I realized I was looking at the royal blue leather billfold that I had wanted when we went to Vail for Christmas. I had decided it was too expensive. I didn't actually *need* a new wallet. My head snapped up and he smiled.

"Your wallet is a travesty," he grinned wickedly. "Use that instead."

"Thank you." I smiled back. "I've been obsessing about this, wishing I'd just gotten it." I did that a lot, and always had to judge a purchase not made on the amount of thought I would put into it afterward. Sometimes I was just out for some retail therapy, but other times I really wanted something and when I didn't end up getting it afterward it nagged at me like dripping water in the shower.

"I know you," he said before giving me a final pat on the cheek. The second the door closed behind him Dylan yelled my name.

"Jory!"

I turned to face her.

"Dane Harcourt is your brother? The architect?"

"Yeah." I smiled because when he was my boss I was proud to claim him, but now that we were family, I practically glowed when anyone mentioned that we were related. Dane had given me his name and made me his brother when he had decided that he didn't just want to run my work life but my whole life. He was born to be a big brother and I was so glad he had chosen to be mine.

"Holy shit," Chris breathed out and everyone laughed at him. "Jory, buddy, you could've warned me. I'm a huge fan of his work."

I shrugged. "Sorry."

"So where did you guys go for Christmas?" Dylan asked me, carrying the champagne to her refrigerator. "I knew you went out of town but you never said where."

"We went to Vail," I told her. "It was nice. He skied and I shopped and we ate and drank and it was awesome. Next year we're going someplace warm, like maybe Maui or Cancun."

"There's only you guys?" she asked me. "Your folks are gone?"

I nodded. "Only us."

"You didn't want to be an architect, Jory?" Chris asked me.

I shook my head. "Nah. He's the genius, I just ride."

"You're a genius too," Dylan chimed in, cupping my face in her hands. "I promise you."

I leaned in to kiss her nose.

"But I could kill you for letting that man walk into my house. My God what he must think."

"He thought it was charming, believe me."

"He's incredible," she breathed out, her eyes narrowing as she looked at me. "And you two look nothing alike apart from the fact that you're both gorgeous."

I patted her cheek. "He and I are in different leagues, babe."

"Jory, come over here and dish," one of the women called to me from the couch. "Sit here by me."

Fun to talk about Dane and realize they were all amazed. I would have been the same way. It wasn't often that a man like that walked into your living room.

By eleven it was clear Ray had blown the evening off, so I left to meet Evan at the club. Before I could go inside though, my phone rang.

"Jory?"

"Hey, Nick." I smiled into the phone. "How ya been?"

"Okay."

I stepped out of the way of some people, so I was standing in front of the club. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry I didn't return your calls around Christmas but—"

"I just didn't want you to think I was breaking my promise.

I told you I would meet your family but you never called me back."

"Yeah, I know and I'm sorry. I had just met somebody and it seemed like it was going to be serious and so I basically blew you off. It was a real shitty thing to do."

I laughed softly. "Everybody blows off their friends for a lover, Nicky, don't beat yourself up. Who cares—we're friends, we're good. Tell me what happened?"

"He told me after New Year's that he didn't want to break up with me over the holidays but that it was over before Christmas. He said I was shitty in bed and that I should think about taking lessons from someone. It's getting to be the story of my life, J."

I winced. "I never said you were shitty in bed. I said we—emphasis on the word 'we'—had no chemistry. That has as much to do with me as you."

"No it doesn't, because we both know you're great in bed."

I was silent because I wasn't sure yet whether he was trying to be offensive or not.

"I bet all the guys you've been in bed with tell you all the time how hot you are and how good and—"

"Bye, Nick," I said before I clicked off my phone and headed into the club.

I had a good time hanging out with Evan but took home numbers instead of guys. He asked me as I was leaving if I was turning into a monk.

On my way home I ducked through an alley and when I hit the sidewalk I remembered I needed tea. The bodega three corners from me sold a smoky-flavored mix I loved, so I went to see if the old man was working. If the husband was working it would still be open; if it was his son's night, he'd closed up to hit the clubs. As I moved up the street I checked both sides, as was my new habit, and there on the other side, coming out of a diner, was Sam. He was holding hands with Maggie Dixon. Dominic, another guy, and two women were with them. I slowed but didn't stop, wanting to hide, but moving instead.

The last time I had seen him was when I appeared in front of the grand jury. He had ignored me in court and had walked away without speaking after my turn on the stand. I had given my testimony and two others had given theirs and after that Brian had decided to take a plea. His choice was to become a witness against his boss and they had put him into protective custody. They didn't need me anymore, and it was understood that the threats on my life would cease. The assistant DA had called to tell me that I was released from any further service. I could be a private citizen again. Nothing had happened for the two months I had been at my new job and I had never once heard from Sam.

I had thought of calling him at Christmas but it seemed futile, and then Dane had eclipsed anything else with his plans and the travel and our bonding. I had wanted to call him on New Year's and then to tell him it was

my birthday and alert him to the fact that I had turned twenty-three. I had no idea why that had seemed important at the time. But the days came and went with growing absences and stacking silence. Too much time had passed with neither of us reaching for the other. On the street, walking by him like a stranger, I felt the finality of it and the enormity of the chasm between us. Best to let sleeping dogs lie, so I did. I shoved my gloved hands deep into my pockets as I went by, tucking my chin to my chest, taking a deep breath of cold January air.

The store was open, and I got the wave from the old man as I went to the back where the tins his wife put her private tea leaves in were. My phone rang and I read Nick's number on the display.

"Do I wanna talk to you?" I asked him irritably.

"Sorry-sorry, I'm sorry. I'm just feeling really shitty and I took it out on you because I could. I'm sorry."

I grunted.

"Please, Jory, I'm so—"

"Don't say sorry even one more time."

"Okay—sorry."

I growled.

"Shit—I... God, Jory, I've been such a mess. I should've called you and... 'cause you're the one I wanted to meet my folks, not Ray Alvarez."

Wait. "What?"

"I said that—"

"Ray Alvarez?"

"Yeah, Raymond Alvarez. That's the guy's name."

"Shit."

"It's funny, you know," he went on, not really hearing me.

"I went to his place tonight and he tried to get rid of me for an hour—said he had somewhere else he had to be. I told him I didn't care, I wanted to fix things with him. And he finally broke down and yelled at me. He told me that we were already broken up and that's why he had agreed to a date.

Somebody at work set him up and he was more interested in meeting some new guy than in talking it out with me."

"When did he break up with you?"

"Couple weeks ago."

I nodded. "I see."

"And he told me it wasn't even really a breakup since we'd basically just been dating. He never asked me for it to be exclusive or anything, I just assumed, ya know?"

"Sure."

"So I tried one last time tonight... I just wanted to be sure before I completely moved on."

"You wanted to make sure of what? That he didn't want you even after he said he didn't?"

"Yeah."

"What the fuck for? Have a little pride, Nicky. If some guy tells you to bounce, you do."

"Easy for you to say, Jory. Have you ever even been in love?"

"Have you?"

"Yeah, with you."

"And that ended damn fast when this guy Ray stepped into the picture," I reminded him. "You were very convincing when you said you were crazy about me but it went away."

"It didn't end, it just—"

"It was infatuation, so it died," I assured him. "You're in such a big hurry to share your life with someone that you hardly even care who it is."

"That's not true."

"I think it is," I told him, understanding finally that Nick was ready to settle down and the partner wasn't really all that important. He needed somebody on the front of the Christmas card with him. He wasn't picky. "You take care, Nicky."

"Jory, please don't—"

"I'll see ya," I said as I hung up. I felt sorry for him at the same time I knew that I was no one's door prize. When my phone rang again I answered before I turned to head back up front.

"Jory, honey, Ray just called and—"

I cut Dylan off and told her all about Chris's co-worker and my doctor. She listened a long time before she let out a deep exhale.

"It's hilarious, right?"

As there was only laughter on the line I got the idea that she agreed with me. I laughed right along with her. The world was actually a teeny tiny place and I was comic relief. I had always suspected as much.

Chapter Five

The following Friday night Dylan and I decided to have our happy-hour drinks at a new place. It was called Molly's Cool Dive Bar and we were having a good time throwing darts. We had been warned once that we were going to have to stop if more of them didn't start hitting the board. They were flying all over the place—pool tables and walls, into the drinks of other patrons. It was a bad idea, so we quit and just drank screwdrivers. It was not the kind of place that served a Cosmopolitan or a Mojito. It was either a screwdriver or a Tom Collins, for the alcohol that wasn't a beer or a shot.

Dylan dared me to take a shot of tequila with her and so of course by the time her husband showed up we were very happy to see him.

"Great," he groaned. "You're both drunk?"

"No," I assured him, shaking my head, trying very hard not to smile. "We're fine. We can go to dinner."

"All evidence to the contrary." He rolled his eyes at me as he pulled his wife to his feet. "Just neither one of you sing, all right?"

"I sing well," Dylan informed him solemnly.

"No, honey, ya really don't," he assured her, grabbing my bicep, tugging me off the barstool, sliding his arm around my neck to steady me before he reached for his wife. "But Jory can't either, as we all found out on Wednesday when we were out with Dane."

It had been a fun night. Dylan and I got tipsy on the house wine at Tulio's and over lasagna and chicken Tetrizzini that was served family-style, we sang from Mariah Carey's songbook. Chris had been mortified until he saw Dane's smile.

He made us shut up while we ate, but on the walk to the car, he encouraged both Dylan and I to let out our inner divas. It was funny and Chris now understood that Dane had an appreciation for the ridiculous and just truly liked me.

Whatever I did was okay.

"You know, Jory, for who Dane Harcourt is—he's a really cool guy."

"I know," I burped.

"Gross," he groaned and shoved me out the front door ahead of him and Dylan.

Dinner Date was an intimate little restaurant downtown that served a beer-based cheese fondue appetizer and had huge Long Island Iced Teas. I got one and so did Dylan, and Chris warned both of us not to spill. When a man appeared at the table we all looked up at him.

"Guys, this is Ray Alvarez, that blew us off last Saturday."

"That's not fair," he said quickly, and my head snapped up because the voice was so deep and warmed with a very mellifluous accent. "You must be Jory," he smiled down at me, holding out his hand for me to take. "It's good to finally put a face to the name."

I nodded as I shook his hand. "And you."

"I understand we both know Nick Sullivan."

"Yes," I said, realizing that he still had my hand.

He pointed at the booth. "Can I sit?"

"Sure," I told him as he released my hand, at the same time sliding into the seat beside me.

He turned to look at me. "So how long've you known Nick?"

"Close to a year."

"Oh, so longer than me."

"Yeah, but you had the whole relationship deal with him. "

He chuckled and I understood from where Nick's obsession had sprung. If you caught the eye of Ray Alvarez you wanted to keep it. And not because he was so drop-dead gorgeous, but his eyes were dark and liquid and the smile had that hint of naughty instead of nice and his voice just resonated inside of you. His hair was almost black, thick and straight, cut short in the back but longer on top. It looked soft and I had the urge to touch it and see.

"We went out a few times," he told me. "It didn't constitute a relationship."

I wasn't listening. "What?"

His smile was wide and under the table his knee bumped mine. "We're talking about Nick."

"Oh yeah."

He leaned his chin in his hand, studied my face, his eyes coming to rest on my mouth. I swallowed hard, realizing all of a sudden how long it had been since I'd been to bed with anyone. I felt the blood rush to my groin as he leaned closer to me.

"What are you guys drinking?" he asked, looking at my empty glass, smiling over at Dylan, "because it's huge, whatever it is."

"Long Island Iced Tea." She giggled, reaching across the table for his hand.

He squeezed it tight and smiled at her.

"I was mad at you for standing Jory up."

"Dy," I scolded her.

"No, it's okay," he told me, the smile there again. "I got stuck explaining things to Nick and I couldn't get out of there."

I really wanted to meet you that night and I hope you won't hold it against me."

"Sure," I nodded as Chris got up.

"I gotta move the car, guys, I'll be right back."

"I need to pee," Dylan announced as I scowled at her.

"What?"

"TMI," I reminded her. "Just 'hey guys I'll be right back' is sufficient."

"Oh don't be such a girl," she snapped at me as she scooted out of the booth.

"You guys are cute," Ray told me when I leaned back against the booth.

"I'm crazy about the girl," I said, rolling my head to look at him.

"Jory, could I take you to dinner tomorrow?"

"That's fast." I squinted at him.

"I like what I see," he said softly. "And I should feed you before I take you home."

"I'm going home with you?"

"After dinner tomorrow night, yes, you are."

"I see."

"I called Nick and he told me all about you. He says you're amazing in bed."

"And you trust him since you told him he was a lousy lay?"

"True-true," he smiled wide. "But just because Nick is bad in bed doesn't mean he doesn't know what good is." He chuckled indulgently. "Besides, you're gorgeous, and I bet the rest of you is just as good. Aesthetics can go a long way."

I nodded, shifting away from him, sitting up straight.

"How old are you?"

He hadn't noticed my slow withdraw and that was fine with me. "I'm twenty-three. You?"

"I'm thirty," he nodded, looking me over like I was something he was thinking of buying. "And without breaking the nice mood we've got going here, can I ask you a question?"

What mood? "Go ahead." It wasn't his fault he was so conceited. He was hot and I was sure that everyone he'd ever given his attention to had probably treated it like a gift.

He took a quick breath. "We've both been with Nicky and I know he's versatile, so...." The inevitable trail off into silence as he searched my face.

"What?"

"Are you versatile too or do you have a preference?"

I had only ever been one way but I was not about to share that information. "Ray, I'm really flattered that you want to take me out, but unfortunately I'm busy tomorrow."

His smile faded just a bit. "Sunday then."

"How 'bout I call you?"

It took him a second to realize what I was saying. "Are you being serious? Are you blowing me off?"

I shrugged.

He scowled. "Are you drunk?"

"Little bit." I grinned. "But the whole one-night stand thing is just not appealing at all."

He stared into my eyes. "You're turning me down."

"Yeah."

"Me?"

I smiled wide. "Yeah."

He stared at me a minute before he got up and walked away. When Dylan and Chris returned to the table I was the only one there.

"Jory, where's—"

"Gone," I cut off my friend, smiling at her.

"But—"

"Guys." I smiled at both of them. "You're banned from ever trying to set me up again."

Chris pointed at his wife. "It was her idea."

I laughed at how quickly he'd ratted her out.

"Jory." She laughed, reaching for my hand across the table.

"Excuse me."

My head snapped up and I found myself looking at Sam Kage.

"I need to speak to you right now."

"Okay." I tried to breathe, sliding out of the booth, his presence and not the alcohol making me unsteady.

"C'mere," he almost growled at me.

"Jory," Dylan said quickly before I could step away from the table. "Who's this?"

"Oh, um, this is Detective Kage. Detective, these are my friends, Dylan and Chris Greer."

He nodded, his brows furrowing, the muscles in his jaw flexing hard.

"Hello," he said quickly, his eyes flicking to mine.

"I'll be right back," I assured them before I walked directly out the front door to the street. I turned to face him and he was closer than I thought he would be. I took another step back to put more space between us.

He stared at me a long minute before he asked me how I was.

"I'm fine. You?"

He nodded. "I'm good."

I shoved my hands deep into my pockets. "What are you doing here?"

His own hands were buried in the pockets of his wool trench coat. "We have a problem."

"We meaning?"

"We meaning the department," he clarified.

"Okay."

"You know that night you saw Brian Minor kill that guy?"

"Of course." I shivered, partly from cold, partly from the memory.

"Well, do you remember the faces of any of the other guys?"

"Sure."

"Yeah, well," he exhaled sharply, "turns out one of those guys is a little more connected than we thought."

"I'm not following you."

"You know the last day you spent at my place... you remember that morning when you called me and I was already working?"

"Yes."

"Okay, well that morning I was actually at your old apartment. Turns out the manager rented it out right after you left to a young guy that looked a lot like you."

"Like me how?"

"Young, blond... I noticed it right off."

I forced a smile. "You're freaking me out a little. Just say whatever you—"

"Jory, somebody cut up the guy that looked like you at your old place and they made it clear that they thought it was you."

"How?"

"They wrote something on the wall."

"On the wall?" I trembled, swallowing hard. "With what?"

"Just—it was there, okay? It wasn't made to look like an accident. It was a message to us that they had gotten to you and meant as a warning to anyone else who might think about talking."

I nodded. "But it wasn't me."

"No."

"And everybody saw me in court."

"Right."

"Brian turned state's evidence, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did."

"Okay, so what does this—"

"It turns out that it was never about Brian."

"You lost me."

"There was another guy there the night Brian shot Saul Grant. "

"There were a lot of guys."

"Yeah, but one in particular was important. Brian's protege, Roman Ivanovich Michaeliev."

"Protege?"

"Yeah. Roman was supposed to be learning Brian's business."

"Why?"

"Roman's father is actually Brian's boss."

"And so?"

"So Brian was never supposed to kill anybody and put Roman at risk."

"But he did."

"Yes, he did."

"Why?"

"Cause Brian's an animal."

"Okay." I shrugged. "I have no idea who—"

"But he knows you, Jory, and now you're the only one that can tie him to that crime scene."

"There's Brian."

"There's not."

"What are you talking about?"

"The thing is everybody else who was in the house that night, including Brian, is now dead."

"Oh shit," I breathed out. "Brian's dead?"

"Yep. He was stabbed to death two weeks ago."

"I thought he was in the witness protection program or whatever?"

"He was."

"He was? So then—what? How does he get killed with people supposedly taking care of him?"

"It looks like we have a leak."

"You mean somebody told where Brian was."

"Right."

"Who?"

"If we knew that we wouldn't have a leak. I'd just be able to tell you who it was."

I nodded. "Okay, so what now?"

"Well, so you know you're the only one who was in the house when Brian Minor shot Saul Grant that's still breathing right now besides Roman."

"And he wants to kill me."

"Yes, he does."

"Why?"

"Because you saw him there, you can put him there, and—"

"But the only person who shot Saul was Brian. Everybody else just watched."

"Watching makes you an accessory, Jory, it doesn't make you innocent."

I nodded. "So Roman's still gonna try and kill me even though Brian is dead."

"Yes, because he's still being charged with a crime as long as you're around."

"Will I have to testify against him?"

"No, you already gave your statement. They expect him to take a plea."

"But meanwhile, if I happen to turn up dead, he walks."

"Right."

It took me a minute to digest it all. "So what now?"

"Well, last night there was some activity about you. No one knows where you are, seems you dropped out of sight."

"And?"

"And they're looking for you."

"To kill me."

"Yes."

I concentrated on breathing so I wouldn't hyperventilate.

He was studying me, his arms crossing over his chest. "It was a nice touch, changing Keyes to Harcourt. Did you think of that or your boss?"

"Well, he's not my boss anymore. I changed jobs."

"Oh. You still live in the same place?"

"Yeah."

He nodded. "Well, so I don't suppose you'd let me place you in protective custody this time around?"

"Doesn't seem like it did Brian any good."

"No, it didn't," he conceded.

"So... no."

"Okay."

We stood in silence for long minutes.

"If Brian and Roman were friends, why did he kill Brian?"

"First, like I said, Brian put Roman in jeopardy by killing Saul with Roman right there, and second," he sighed, pulling his hair back from his face hard. "When it got right down to it, Brian was turning state's evidence. He would have buried Roman and his father."

I nodded.

"You get it, right?"

"Yeah," I told him staring down at my shoes.

"So you should—"

"Not get shot," I said to the ground.

"Yes. Try hard."

"Okay."

There was a long silence.

"I saw you last week, out with Dominic and your girl Maggie," I said to change the subject, raising my eyes to his.

"You did?"

"Yeah." I smiled at him.

"Why didn't you stop?"

"What would have been the point?"

He shrugged. "I guess."

I cleared my throat. "So listen, I'm freezing so I'm gonna go back in. It was good to see you and I really appreciate you finding me to tell me all this. I'll be careful."

"Good."

I pressed my lips together tight and stepped around him, nervous for whatever reason.

"Who was that guy I saw talking to you in the booth?"

I turned around to look at him.

"Jory?"

"What guy?"

"Earlier. There was a guy... who was he?"

"Oh... nobody."

"Nobody? He was sittin' awful close."

I made a face. "Some guy lookin' to get laid. I sent him on his way." I wondered how long he had been watching me before he came over to talk.

"You're not interested in gettin' laid?"

"I'm not interested in a one-night stand," I told him. "It ain't me."

"No?"

I grinned lazily. "It used to be me, I'll give you that, but not anymore."

He nodded. "Okay."

"Were your holidays good?" I asked, walking backwards, still facing him.

"They were. My folks are crazy about Maggie and her family's great."

"Great," I said lamely, pivoting around.

"Jory."

I didn't stop walking but looked at him over my shoulder.

"Take care."

"Yessir, Detective Kage," I said softly, opening the door, feeling the warm air envelop me as I went back inside the restaurant. I was so proud of myself for not breaking down but I was exhausted from all the energy it took. Who knew pretending to be nonchalant could be so draining?

I insisted that Dylan and Chris stay and eat and drink.

They could turn the evening into a date night. For me it was a bust, between Ray being a jerk and Sam having become a stranger. And even though it was freezing out I decided to walk home to clear my head. I was surprised when my phone rang.

"What?" I asked irritably, reading the number on my display before I answered.

"I just got off the phone with Ray," Nick began. "He accused me of making you turn him down to get back at him.

I told him I didn't have that kind of power over you."

"And you don't."

"I know I don't," he said quickly. "Like I said, that's what I told him."

I was silent.

"So, for the record, why did you turn him down?"

"'Cause the guy's a dick, Nicky," I told him. "Why would you, with all you've got going for you, even let a guy like that close to you? He's a conceited asshole."

"I know."

"So? Why?"

"He comes on really strong, J. He acted like he was really into me and I—"

I made a noise. "He's a total tool. I'd have to be lobotomized before I'd let him close to me."

He chuckled. "You know, I like you, I really do. You wanna come and have pie with me?"

"Pie?" I smiled into the phone. "I haven't decided if I even like you anymore."

"You like me. I'm likable. I'm an idiot, but I'm likable."

"And so, what? We're gonna be friends now?"

"Could we please?"

He'd screwed up, I'd screwed up—we really were very compatible. "Fine. Should I come now?"

"That'd be good."

So at one o'clock in the morning I went to the county hospital, picked up my friend, and went and had peach pie and coffee. He told me all about Ray Alvarez and we laughed like idiots. He ended up snorting milk out of his nose. You could never have too many friends.

Chapter Six

Sometimes there is nothing better than zoning out over a task. Just doing something mindless can be more relaxing than almost anything. So I didn't mind that I had been nominated to do the dishes after dinner while everyone else sat around and vegged. Besides, my friend Richard told me that his kitchen never looked better than after I cleaned it up.

He had just left me, telling me to hurry up because they were about to start playing board games. I wasn't surprised when my phone beeped and I saw Dane's number on the display.

This was inevitable.

"Remind me to kill you," he said instead of hello.

"Hi." I tried not to even smile. "How are you?"

"You did this on purpose."

"Whatever do you mean?" I cackled.

"Payback is hell."

"How's the date?"

"You're such an ass," Dane assured me.

"What? Art walk no good?"

Long silence. "You knew it was this big romantic deal."

I was so glad he couldn't see me. "Did I?"

He was on the date I had set him up on with one of my co-workers, and I'd assured him that I would take care of everything. All he had to do was show

up. True to my word, I had set up the date from heaven. I had wanted to show him something off the beaten track since he was getting a little jaded with dating, and had ended up really outdoing myself.

They were on an art walk in Oak Park, through some Frank Lloyd Wright homes but also other private residences, where they were looking at personal collections. There were strolling musicians, a silent estate sale where trunks could be purchased that were possibly filled with treasures, or at least really old books that would look cool in a bookcase. There were different courses of meals in each home, starting with wine and cheese and ending with champagne or spiced cider.

It had sounded wonderful and I had guessed at, but not asked about, the romantic component.

"I can hear you smiling," he accused me, his voice flat.

"You can't hear a smile." I chuckled. "Besides, don't be such a stick-in-the-mud. It sounded wonderful on the Web site."

"Oh did it?"

"I've got hot-air ballooning for you to do next."

He hung up on me and I was still laughing when I heard the quiet cough behind me. I turned and a guy had slipped into the kitchen, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking at me.

"Hey." I smiled at him.

Slight smile, like he was uncertain. "Rich said to come in here and you'd feed me even though I'm super late and it was really rude of me not to call."

I chuckled. "Rich's words."

His grin was crooked and he had dimples. "Yeah, Rich's words."

"Don't let him make you feel bad. It's not like he's the poster boy for etiquette himself."

He moved further into the room, closer to me. "I know, right. And it's not like I could've called anyway. I mean I was in the bug room and—"

My brows furrowed. "Bug room?"

He chuckled, leaning on the counter. "You should see your face."

"Sorry."

The smile I was getting made his dark eyes glow. I had never actually seen chocolate brown eyes before, I was certain now that I had. His straight, shoulder-length hair, long lashes, and eyebrows were all that same raven-wing black.

"So can I eat?" he asked because I was staring and not moving.

"Oh yeah—sorry."

"No-no," he said gently, reaching out to touch my shoulder to stop me from opening the refrigerator. "You can stand there and look at me all night if you want."

I nodded, arching one eyebrow as I turned to get out the food I had just put away.

He laughed softly behind me. "What's your name?"

"Jory," I said as I put bowls on the counter. "You?"

"Kai."

"And what do you do, Kai, that takes you to a bug room?"

His smile was wide as he passed me a plate from the cabinet next to his head. He obviously knew his way around Richard's kitchen. They had to be

close friends. "I work at the Field Museum and I was in the bug room where we keep these beetles that basically eat the flesh off stuff."

"Are you sure you can eat?" I asked, squinting at him.

His laughter came from way down deep. "Yeah. Maybe you'd like to come with me sometime and see it?"

My eyes widened. "Go with you to the bug room?"

"Yeah. What do you say?"

"Okay." I grinned at him. "Sure."

"When?"

"I dunno. When do you want me?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"I know."

I shrugged. "What time?"

"How 'bout we get lunch? I know this great little Italian place, we can have ____"

"Actually, I gotta have brunch with my brother, then I can meet you."

"You have Sunday brunch with your brother?" he asked skeptically, one brow raised.

"Yeah. Why?"

"No reason. That's awesome."

"Why is it awesome?" I chuckled because of the way he was smiling.

"It's just nice. I like it."

"Whatever, man." I smiled at him. "So we can go another—"

"I'll meet you after lunch," he said quickly, brushing past my attempt to reschedule. "Do you know where the Field Museum is?"

"Yeah, I've been there lots of times. The dinosaur is really cool."

"Uh," he groaned. "You so don't wanna get me started on the damn dinosaur. All that money could have been directed into other research programs that—"

I put up my hands. "I'll meet you by the store inside?"

His eyes twinkled. "Don't wanna hear my usual rant?"

"No thanks."

"Okay so... by the store at say, one?"

"One's good."

He sighed. "Good. Can I get your number in case I get hit by a bus or something?"

"And how're you calling if you get hit by a bus?"

"I'll gasp out that somebody needs to call you before I die." He smiled, his eyes locking on my mouth. "Is that okay?"

I stared into all that darkness. "It's okay."

He leaned on the counter, pulling out his cell phone. "Give it to me."

We stood in the kitchen, me leaning against the sink while he ate standing up. I told him to go sit down in the living room, but he preferred to stay where he was and talk to me.

I asked more questions about the museum and he explained that, with his doctorate in biology, he worked in the Division of Mammals in the Zoology department. He had me laughing over the phone calls that came in from people in the city.

"This lady called the other day and described this animal to me over the phone and when I asked her what she thought it was she said she thought it was a yeti."

"As in *the* Yeti. The Abominable Snowman."

"Yeah."

I smiled at him. "And you said?"

"I explained that it probably wasn't but that maybe she should call animal control."

"Why?"

"I dunno. Maybe she's got a rabid Samoyed in her back yard for all I know."

I nodded. "I see."

"You have a great smile, Jory."

I looked up at him. "Thanks. You too."

He took a shaky breath. "So tell me more about working at a PR firm."

I shrugged. "It's not that exciting."

"Okay. Tell me how old you are."

"Twenty-three. You?"

"Thirty-one."

I tilted my head as I looked at him. "I'm too old for you, right? You like eighteen-year-olds?"

His jaw clenched. "No. Age doesn't mean anything. I've dated guys in their forties and fifties and guys younger than me. I go where my interest draws me."

I nodded.

"And you?"

"Same."

"Good."

I coughed softly. "So these beetles that eat flesh—what kind do that? Not like ladybugs, right?"

He smiled at me. "No, they're called Dermestid beetles."

"Okay."

"Like you care."

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't interested. I have all sorts of odd pieces of knowledge in my head."

He reached out and touched the hem of my shirt. "If you have time tomorrow, maybe after I show you the museum, we could take a walk."

"That sounds nice."

His eyes flicked up to mine and locked there. "I wish it was tomorrow."

"Yeah, me too."

"J!"

We both turned as Richard came into the kitchen.

"Carey's here and he wants to go dancing instead of sitting around playing board games. Everybody else is in. What do you say?"

I looked at Kai. "Do you wanna go?"

"I don't care as long as I get to hang with you." He smiled quickly.

"Aww, that's so sweet," Richard said, giving me a look before he walked back out.

"That was very nice," I assured him.

"Well, thanks, but so you know—I am a crappy dancer.

You're gonna cry."

"You think?"

"Oh yeah," he assured me, chuckling. "My sister Grace wouldn't let me dance at her wedding because she was so scared I'd freak people out."

I laughed at him as he sighed deeply and touched the collar of my shirt.

"You look really good. Maybe you can take a look at my wardrobe and give me some pointers."

"You look fine to me," I said, my eyes sliding over his long, lean frame. He looked good in his pocket T-shirt clinging tightly to the sinewy muscles in his biceps, chest, and abdomen. His faded 501 jeans fit well, his beat-up hiking boots had seen better days—all of it giving the impression of a man that was both solid and strong. He wasn't strikingly beautiful or the kind of guy you noticed instantly, he was the kind of guy that grew on you, because in the two hours that we had been talking in the kitchen I had become a

great admirer of his eyes, his shoulders, the veins in his hands, the way he smiled, and the soft, gentle tone of his voice. He radiated a sort of soothing quiet that was comforting, like he was comfortable in his own skin.

"Yeah? I look okay?"

"You do." I smiled at him. "What kind of music do you like?"

"Why?"

"There's a jazz club by my apartment that's really good if you maybe wanted to go listen to some instead of going dancing."

"I'll be honest, I haven't had the opportunity to hear a lot of jazz, but I would much rather listen to music with you then show you how poorly my body moves."

"I'm sure your body moves just fine."

He stared at me. "Why don't we go now?"

He helped me clean Richard's kitchen back up and when we left together there were a lot of catcalls and comments and Carey's final "Be careful, you two!" was probably the most obvious. Out on the street, he pointed at an ancient Volkswagen van.

"Is that yours?"

"Yeah, I know, it's—"

"It's awesome," I breathed out, walking over to it, peering in the windows. "What is this, like a sixty-five? Sixty-seven?"

He chuckled behind me and I turned to look at him.

"Big aficionado of VW vans, are you?"

"I just love old stuff period."

He smiled at me. "You know, you are not at all what I expected."

"How'dya mean?"

"Jory, you must know... I mean, I go in the kitchen and there you are and you're so... beautiful... and the smile and—

and you just... and you like my old, ugly van. It's amazing."

"Why?"

"You look like you'd be the kind of guy that needs a guy with money."

I snorted out the laugh. "I have my own money and what I don't have my brother has. I'm good."

He looked into my eyes. "Would you like to drive my piece of junk?"

"Really?" I was so excited.

He laughed out loud. "God you sound so excited. Hell yes.

Come get the keys."

I drove us to the jazz club across the street from my apartment and we talked and laughed and listened and he gave me a nod that let me know he liked both the music and the company. I offered him a cup of tea after the last set and he draped an arm around my neck as he crossed the street with me.

He liked my apartment, the wooden framed windows, exposed beams, and the ceiling fans that looked like they were as old as the building itself. Content to sit on the counter and watch me make tea, I asked when his last long-term relationship was. He explained about the two-year love affair that had ended six months ago, with a veterinarian.

"What happened?" I prodded as I poured the water into the teapot so it could steep.

"He didn't want to move in with me." He sighed heavily. "I asked him to after three months and he said it was too soon, but when we hit two years and he was still saying no... it became painfully obvious that he was waiting for someone better to come along."

"Sorry."

He shrugged. "It's okay. He didn't get that my love was a gift and if somebody doesn't appreciate the value of being loved... not a lot you can do."

"True."

"And your last love affair, as you put it?"

"It was three months ago, but it wasn't anything long-term like yours. I thought it was gonna be, but the guy... it turned out he wasn't as into me as I thought he was."

"No?"

"No."

"How come?"

"I think it was hard for him since he wasn't out, ya know?"

"Oh yeah, I do know. I've been there."

"Tell me."

"I dated this guy for six months and his family had no idea he was gay. His friends all thought he was this big ladies' man and—shit... what a mess."

"Bad, right?"

He laughed at me. "So much worse than bad. I mean, he still calls sometimes and asks me if I can see me and can I just give him some time

and... it'll never change but he seems to have deluded himself into thinking that one of these days he's gonna come out of the closet."

"My guy's a cop."

"Oh shit! You know that's so never gonna happen, right?"

"I know." I nodded, exhaling slowly. "It was just tough to let go of."

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching out to squeeze my shoulder.

I shrugged. "What're ya gonna do."

"All I wanna do is meet somebody and settle down and just be done with this whole dating mess." He smiled at me.

And for whatever reason my libido turned off and my brain turned on.

"Jory?"

I stepped back and looked at him.

"What?"

"This is gonna sound really weird like crazy woo-woo weird but you gotta go with it, and don't get mad, just open up your mind to the possibility that I'm not the end of your journey, but merely a signpost along the way."

He scowled at me. "I knew you were too pretty to be sane."

"I'm a big believer in signs."

"I bet you do Ouija boards and Tarot cards too, don'tcha?"

"Make fun if you like, but I have the perfect guy for you."

He grinned wide. "Actually, Jory, I think you're the guy for me."

But I wasn't. We were in different places in our lives, which had nothing at all to do with our ages. I wasn't ready to settle down with anyone else but Sam Kage, and since that wasn't happening... but I knew somebody who was. I knew the exact man he needed to meet. "Will you just do me a favor and let me set you up on a blind date?"

"You're seriously disturbed."

"Please. You won't be sorry and I think I—"

"If you wanna get rid of me, just—"

"No-no-no, it's not like that. Just c'mon, Kai. If it doesn't work out I'll go wherever you want—do whatever—just—just—"

"Deal." He smiled at me, holding out his hand. "Shake on it. You're mine if it goes badly."

I clasped the hand tight because there was no way in hell I didn't have the greatest matchmaking skills in the history of the world. I would stake my life on it. I was Cupid in the flesh.

Chapter Seven

I was at Navy Pier with binoculars and a trench coat the following night. I was limping, because I had twisted my ankle playing racquetball with Dane that morning, but I was not going to let a little pain get in the way of my spy mission.

I had set up Dr. Kai Akita, PhD, with Dr. Nick Sullivan, MD, and from the looks of things—the body language, the glances, and the testing touches—it was going really well. Nick's hand on his shoulder was allowed to stay, Kai's fingers sliding over Nick's collar was rewarded with a big smile, and the proximity that they kept while walking were all very good signs. I was so pleased with myself I felt like I was glowing. As I leaned over the railing to try and see them as they walked toward the arcade, someone cleared their throat.

"Hey." I smiled at Sam Kage as he scowled at me.

"What the hell are you doing out here?"

"I——"

"People are trying to kill you and you're just——"

They were moving and I had to see. I raised a finger to shut him up and hobbled over to lean against the railing on the opposite side of the pier. I used the binoculars to make sure I didn't lose them.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he asked again, louder, firmer, his voice next to my ear.

"Why can't you ask a question without swearing?"

"Jory... I'm trying not to——"

"It should be perfectly obvious that I'm spying," I said, cutting him off, watching as Nick's hand went to rest between Kai's shoulder blades. "God, I should do this for a living."

"What are you looking at?"

"Remember the doctor that liked me?" I asked as I watched them buy corn dogs.

"Yeah."

"Okay, so I set him up on a blind date with a guy that I met last night at my friend Richard's house."

There was a long silence and I thought he had walked away until I heard him breathe. "Wait now. You met a guy last night and he let you set him up on a blind date?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did a guy you met last night let you set him up on a blind date?"

I lowered the binoculars and scowled at him "Why is that important? The thrill of this moment is that I am a love god."

"Is that right?" He smirked at me.

"Are you kidding?" I mumbled, raising the binoculars. "I'm Cupid, man."

"Okay Cupid," he said drolly. "What's going on with your ankle?"

"Oh... I screwed it up playing racquetball with Dane. I gotta explain to him that he needs to pick on someone his own size from now on."

"I see. May I ask another question?"

"Can I stop you?"

"Dane is what to you now?"

"How'dya mean?"

"Well I'm curious because he used to be called boss and now he's Dane. Explain that to me."

"Dane is my brother now."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He likes running my life."

"I'll bet," he said before sighing deeply. "He's a good guy."

"Yes, he is," I agreed, putting the binoculars down while I crossed through the crowd back to the other side of the pier.

I couldn't see so when I saw a bucket that was turned over behind a cotton candy stall I got up on top of it. I was just in time to see them stop for ice cream; Kai had just wiped some of it off Nick's nose. It was too cute.

"You're gonna fall off that and actually break your ankle, idiot."

I grunted.

"Seriously, why does a guy you just met let you set him up on a date with somebody else?"

"Because he's a keen judge of character and he could tell right off that I had the gift."

"Bullshit."

I shrugged. "Believe what you want."

"Tell me."

"I told him if he had a bad time he could have me."

"I'm sorry?"

"You heard me."

"Have you?"

"Yeah."

"Define that."

"I think it's pretty self-explanatory."

"Do you?"

"Yeah," I said, watching them smile into each other's eyes.

"Awww."

"So you're saying if the blind date goes bad, this guy—what's his name?"

"Kai," I said putting the binoculars down, unsure for a minute what the better course of action was. Should I let my ankle bear my weight for the second it took to get down or get down on it and let it hold me for that second?

"What are you doing?"

I looked down and he looked up and I was suddenly caught in the dark scowl. He looked really annoyed. "Could you move a little? I need to get down."

He reached toward me. "Lemme help you."

"No thanks," I waved him back. "Just move."

"Fine," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets, taking a step away from me. "So seriously—this guy Kai gets to what—fuck you or do whatever the hell he wants to you?"

"Yeah," I winced, letting my ankle hold me for a second, stepping down onto my good one. "Shit."

"And you'll let him?"

I cracked a grin. "It's just my ass, man. I've done worse for less," I assured him before I limped away, ducking between stalls, poking my head around the caramel corn and the hand-dipped candy apples before leaning out from under the overhang to check on them as they stopped to get some bottled water. I was hoping I'd lost him.

"For crissakes, Jory, you—"

"God—why are you here?" I almost whined, turning to look up into his eyes.

His eyes narrowed. "I'm here with Dom and his girl Lily and Maggie."

"Well, I'm sure they're waitin' on ya," I said flatly, hoping my dismissive tone would prompt him to leave.

I watched his jaw clench. "You know you—"

My hand came up to cut him off as I reached into the front pocket on my peacoat and pulled out my phone. I dialed and turned away from him to return to my spying. She answered on the second ring.

"Mother Goose."

"What?"

"I thought we should have code names," Dylan giggled.

"Since we're undercover and all."

My friends were all crazy. "Where are you?"

"I'm getting Indian fry bread. Where are you?"

"You're eating again?"

"I'm at the pier. What the hell else do you do here?"

"Stop eating, we're on a stakeout."

"Shut up. Where are you?"

"By the little dance floor with the black lights."

Her voice was muffled since she was eating and talking.

"I'll be right there. Don't move anymore, you're gonna be crippled by tomorrow."

"Fine. Hurry up," I said before I hung up and replaced the phone in my coat.

"Who was that?"

I had hoped he'd taken the hint but he was still there.

"I asked you a question."

"My girl Dylan," I snapped at him.

"Who?"

"Bye, Detective," I dismissed him, raising the binoculars, smiling wide as they sat down on a bench on the pier, facing each other.

"You know you should show me more respect."

I grunted and moved away from him. I was going to raise the binoculars when he stepped in front of me.

"Maybe I should just take you home."

"You have Maggie to take home," I blurted out with more vehemence than I wanted.

"Wait—what?"

I shook my head. "Just never mind. Could you please leave me alone?"

But he didn't move.

"What do you want?" I asked him, my voice sounding strained.

"You're hurt, lemme help you."

"No," I snapped irritably, shifting around him, looking for the lovebirds. "I don't need your help."

"Clearly you do."

I groaned loudly.

"Jory, you—"

"There you are." Dylan sniffled as she walked up beside me. She lifted my arm and leaned into my side. "Lean on me," she ordered gently. "I don't want your ankle to implode."

I draped my arm around her neck and kissed her temple.

Her contented sigh made me smile.

"So how's it going? Are you off the hook or what?"

I passed her the binoculars and pointed down the pier.

She put them to her eyes and smiled wide. "Oh yeah, you're safe. Good job, love god."

I glanced over at Sam. "Thank you."

His scowl could not have been any darker.

"Hi." Dylan smiled at him suddenly. "You're the detective, right? I met you Friday night."

He looked directly at her and I heard her sharp, indrawn breath before she shivered. I understood. Hard to know what your reaction to Sam Kage should be. The man was menacing and alluring at the same time. He radiated danger and plain old raw sex appeal. The combination was intoxicating.

"You're his new partner, right?" Sam said gruffly.

"Huh?"

"Aren't you Jory's partner?"

"What?"

I bumped her to break the spell.

"Oh... yes," she recovered, offering him her hand. "It's nice to see you again."

He shook her hand quickly. "And you."

"We're on a spy mission," she smiled impishly. "Did he tell you?"

"Yes, he did."

"Are you here alone? Do you want to share a cab home with us?"

"No, I have friends and—"

"His girl's waiting on him," I told Dylan. "He has to go."

"Oh okay," she nodded, her arm tightening around my back. "Well then, we'll see you, Detective. You have a nice night."

He nodded.

"Could you give me a little of your weight, please," she snapped at me gently.

"I'll crush you."

"I think I weigh more than you." She sighed. "Just let me take care of you. I'm dying to mother you."

I rolled my eyes and we started to walk away.

"Why don't you let me drive you guys home?"

Dylan stopped but I kept going.

She planted her feet.

I pushed her off balance, forcing her to take a step forward.

"What are you doing?" She was confused. "Stop nudging me."

"Let's just go."

But she ignored me, turning instead back to Sam. "I thought you were out with your friends?"

"I am but we're about to leave anyway. It's no trouble, and if his ankle's bad like you said then I would be glad to help."

"It's not that bad," I grumbled quickly.

"Are you kidding?" Dylan was flabbergasted. "The limping is getting worse not better."

I sighed deeply. "We can catch a cab. It's no problem.

Thanks anyway."

"Jory," Dylan began, "don't be an idiot." She looked over at Sam. "We would appreciate a ride, Detective, thank you so much."

"Sure," he said softly, walking over to us. "Maybe you should lean on—"

"It's fine," I said fast, stepping past him.

"Jory," Dylan gasped, reaching for me.

"I'm fine," I told her, gritting my teeth as I strode down the pier. I was nothing if not stubborn.

Dylan ended up holding my hand as we followed Sam back to where Maggie was leaning against a railing, watching Dominic and Lily play bumper cars.

"There you are." She smiled at him, her eyes soft. "Where did you go?"

"I saw some friends," he muttered, tipping his head toward Dylan and me. "They need a ride. Are you guys ready to go?"

"Oh yes." She smiled at him. "I've been ready for an hour.

I've gotta work tomorrow."

"Okay, let's go then."

"Are you going to stay at my place?"

My stomach lurched.

"Not tonight," he said coolly.

"Oh." She was disappointed. "Okay."

"Can I get a witness?" Dominic shouted out as he stalked over to us.

I smiled at him and when he reached me his hand came down heavy on my shoulder.

"I am actually very happy to see you." He squeezed tight.

"I swear to God, kid, you're a lucky sonofabitch."

"Jory?" Dylan looked up into my face.

"I'll tell ya later," I assured her. "Dominic Kairov, this is Dylan Greer, my partner at Barrington."

He reached for her hand and they shook as a striking, statuesque blonde woman stepped up behind him. She was Lily Beck, and he introduced both Dylan and I to her. It was only then that Maggie complained she hadn't been introduced to either one of us.

"Maggie Dixon," she smiled at me as she took my hand.

"You're *the* Jory?"

"I'm just Jory," I told her.

"No, you're the one that stayed with Sam for a while, right? The teacups are yours."

"Yes."

She nodded. "He won't let me touch them."

"You should just throw them out."

She chuckled. "So not happening."

"Let's go," Sam growled and everyone moved at the same time.

At the cars Dominic volunteered to take Dylan and me since he was closer, but Sam shut him down hard. I got a slap across the back before he left and was made to promise to call if I needed him. I was surprised, since I had never thought Dominic even liked me much less cared if I lived or died. I wondered at the change of heart.

Sam held the door open for Maggie and Dylan as I climbed up on the other side. Once we were all in Maggie started asking questions. She wanted to know all about what we did at Barrington. My phone rang so I got to let Dylan answer her.

"Hello?"

"Jory, have I told you lately that you're amazing?"

"Hey, Nicky." I smiled wide. "How's it goin'?"

"So much better than good."

"I'm glad."

"He thinks we have a real connection. He said he can't believe we're in the same place in our lives."

"See." I sighed. "I'm gifted."

"He thinks I'm gorgeous, Jory."

"You are, Nicky. Tell me again that I was right."

"You were right—so right. I'm sorry I gave you any shit at all."

"Call me tomorrow."

"I will. Good night, my friend."

I hung up and turned to smile at Dylan.

"Well?"

"I am the love god."

She smiled at me. "Okay, love god, you've done your good deed for the year. We need to find a nice boy for you now."

"Okay." I reached across the seat for her hand and lifted the palm to my lips. "Whatever you say, love."

"I adore you."

"Right backatcha."

"Ohmygod," Maggie cooed. "Could you two be any cuter?"

I chuckled and Sam asked where Dylan lived.

It turned out that Dylan was the first drop-off. We hugged and kissed and I promised to call her in the morning if she needed to pick me up. On our way to my place, Maggie suggested we stop and get something to eat. She was starving. I wasn't asked; he just pulled over and parked the car before I could cast my vote.

Inside, he left us to make a call before we were seated.

When the waiter came to lead us to the table, he was back. I went to take a step and my right leg cramped up. It had been taking most of my weight all day and it was tired.

"What's wrong?" he asked me, hand on my shoulder, looking at my face.

"I think I'm gonna skip this and go home. I need to get my weight off—"

"You need to sit and ice your ankle and wrap it up. It's not broken or you wouldn't be able to put any weight on it at all, but I bet it's twisted really badly. You need crutches too."

"I don't have—"

"Easy to get. I have this thing I used when I tore my ACL tendon and meniscus. You put ice and water in, and you wrap the other part around your knee or whatever and it—"

"I think I have an ice pack." I smiled, cutting off his rambling as I leaned around him to look at Maggie. "I gotta go, it was really nice to meet you. I'll see ya, all right?"

"Jory, why don't we—"

I turned to go but the arm around my neck stopped me.

"Stop fighting me," he said gruffly, pinning me against his body, fiddling with the collar of my coat. "You're always fighting with me."

I closed my eyes, let out a deep breath, and leaned back against him.

"Let's eat something, then I'll take you home and fix up your ankle." His breath was warm down the side of my neck, the words spoken softly, gently, meant to soothe me.

"I—"

"I bet I even have extra crutches at my place." His lips grazed my skin; he was that close to me.

"I can't go to your place."

"Why not?" His voice was so low, so deep.

"I just can't."

"That makes no sense."

"I just... let go."

"You're shaking," he nearly growled.

"Sam, what's going on?" Maggie asked suddenly.

"Nothing." He sighed before he clutched me tighter. "Lean on me, J."

I had to let him help me to the booth. I gave him my weight and he wrapped an arm around my waist. He was careful, moving slowly, and I heard the deep sigh that came up out of him.

"Sam, maybe we should run Jory to the hospital." Maggie offered, her eyes darting between us.

"No," he said flatly. There would be no argument.

At the table, he slid into the booth beside me after shedding his coat and picking up his menu. "What're you gonna eat?"

"I'm not really hungry," I told him, leaning back.

"You're gonna hafta take something for the pain so you need food in your stomach."

"I can just—"

"Take off your coat."

I rolled my eyes but took off my trench coat, laying it down between us.

"Put it on the other side, I've got no room."

I moved it against the wall and took a sip of the water the waitress dropped off. After a couple of minutes he realized I was staring at him and turned to look at me.

"What?"

"Is there anything else?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you've been barking orders at me... is there anything else?"

His grin was lazy and sexy. "Nope."

"Good," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

"You want pancakes?"

"No."

"An omelet?"

"I'm really not hungry."

He put his knee against mine under the table. "I don't care."

I tried to slide over but his hand was on my thigh instantly, holding me there.

"I'm feeding you, end of story."

"You know, Sam, this whole macho bullshit thing you—"

His phone rang.

"Wait," he said, putting up his hand as he pulled his phone from the coat lying beside him on the seat. "Hello. Yeah," he said, standing up, hovering over the table. "I—hold on." He pressed it to his chest so whoever was on the other end wouldn't hear him. "Just eat something."

"I'm not hungry."

"You're always hungry."

"I am not," I snapped at him.

"Eat," he ordered, his voice leaving no room for argument.

Except from me.

"I'm not five, Sam. If I say I'm—"

"If you don't eat you're gonna be sick so just eat."

I scowled up at him.

"Don't gimme the look, J, just fuckin' eat."

"Don't swear."

"Eat and I won't."

"That's stupid," I told him.

"Then I'm stupid, just eat!" he barked at me.

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Eat!"

"No."

"Jory, if—"

"Don't tell me what to do," I cut him off.

"God," he roared, and I was vaguely aware that the tables around us quieted. "Anything to fight with me! For crissakes, baby, just eat!" he yelled at me before he stalked away.

He was exasperated but I didn't care. I opened the menu and started looking at it even though I was pretty sure I was going to kill him when he got back.

"Jory."

There was no man on the planet as annoying as him!

"Jory."

I leaned the menu forward and looked across the table at Maggie. I was startled by the expression on her face. "Are you all right?"

"No, I don't think so." Her voice was shaky. "Did he just call you 'baby'?"

"What?" I said automatically, which usually gives people the second they need to take back anything they maybe wished they hadn't said.

"Did he just call you 'baby'?" Deeper tremor in her voice the second time she asked.

"No," I assured her.

"I think he did."

"No," I repeated, with more conviction.

"Yes... yes, he did."

And my heart sank because he had. I didn't even think about it because, between us, the two of us, it was normal. I was never usually Jory. I was J, or baby, or love. It had come out of him without thought, and now Maggie was sitting across from me just stunned. "I'm sure it was an accident."

She just stared at me.

"You know how sometimes you're looking at one person but you say the name of somebody else because you were thinking about them or talking to them a second before and—"

"He called you 'baby'."

"Only because he was looking at you but talking to me."

"He wasn't looking at me."

"Yeah, but a minute ago he—"

"That would be a nice theory except that he doesn't call me anything but Maggie. Not Mags like Dominic does or Maggie May like Lily does or even doll like his brother Michael does. He has no pet names for me, but you—you he calls

'baby'." Her eyes were riveted on mine. "Why is that, Jory?"

"It just came out. It means nothing."

"I think it means everything and explains a hell of a lot."

"I—"

"I've had sex with that man one time, Jory, just one time in four months and —"

I put up my hand to stop her. "Please don't tell me about—"

"

"I want him so bad it's eating me up," she cut me off, ignoring my plea.

"But he just wants to hold me and cuddle and—"

"Most women like that stuff."

"I want that man to take me to bed and screw my brains out, Jory, and he won't. He just won't...." She trailed off, her eyes all over me. "And I've tried everything to... it's embarrassing what I've tried."

I had no idea what to say.

She coughed. "And now I see him with you. He watches you, he can barely keep his hands off you, and that whole scene... you guys argue like an old married couple."

"I don't think—"

"And then the name...." She trailed off, studying my face.

"How many times did you sleep with him?"

"You're way off."

"I think I'm right on target, actually." Her eyes locked on mine. "Sam's gay?"

"No."

She nodded. "Then he was what—curious?"

"You're so wrong, you have—"

"Ohmygod," her hand covered her mouth. "That's why I can't move anything or throw out any of that tea neither of us drinks... he didn't just sleep with you, he's in love with you."

I shook my head. "No."

"Jory... I'm so jealous and you... you're so lucky."

"I don't have to sit here and listen to you," I said, grabbing my coat, sliding out of the booth.

"Jory, you should stay—I'll go."

But I didn't look back because the tears had come fast, filling my eyes, slipping down my cheeks.

I took several deep breaths outside in front of the restaurant before I started hobbling toward the street to get a cab.

"What are you doing?" he growled behind me.

I made sure when he came around to face me that I turned away. "I'm going home. Go back inside and take care of Maggie. She's all—"

"Cause I called you baby."

My head snapped up and my eyes met his.

He looked tired all of a sudden. "I didn't even realize I said it until I got back to the table and she looked like she got slapped or something."

"I told her you—"

"I know. She told me what ya said. I appreciate it."

"I—"

He took a step closer and took my chin in his hand, tilting my head up. "It doesn't matter anymore. I'm fuckin'

exhausted."

"Sam, I—"

"Let's go."

I just stood there, staring at him.

"She went home," he gestured back at the restaurant.

"Why?"

His smile was sad. "'Cause when she asked me if I was in love with you, I said yes."

All I could do was stare at him, up into his eyes.

"Actually, I think what I said was 'God, yes'."

"Sam, you don't—"

His hand closed lightly around my throat, his thumb sliding over my jaw. "Don't be an idiot. Of course I love you. How could I not?"

I stopped breathing.

His eyes were so soft as he looked down at me. "Come home with me. Let me take care of you. Please. I'm begging you."

There was no one alive strong enough to say no to that.

"Okay," I nodded and he bent and flipped me over his shoulder.

"Don't—put me down!"

"Your ankle's bad," he grumbled, slapping my ass hard.

"Shut the fuck up, the car's right there."

When he dumped me into the seat, slamming the door shut, I sat for a moment as he got in.

"What? What now?"

I rolled my head to look at him. "It's just gonna end badly.

It always does."

"Nope," he grunted, starting the car. "Not this time."

"Why not?" I sounded weary.

"'Cause everybody's gonna know about you. I already told my folks, so—"

"What?" I gasped.

"Hah!" he barked at me. "Didn't see that coming, did ya, you cocky piece of shit... always think you know everything..."

and put on your goddamn seat belt!"

I put it on in a daze, staring at his profile.

After a few minutes of silence I asked him to explain what he'd said.

"About telling my folks about you, ya mean?"

"Don't be a jerk. Just tell me."

"Yeah, so I told my mom all about us—all about you—and she said she was glad I told her but that she already knew."

Quick exhale. "And I asked her how she knew and she said I was another person when you were around. She said that you bring out the very best in me." He turned to look at my face.

"What more can you ask for?"

I was stunned and speechless. His mother was okay with me, with him, with him and me?

"And my dad said that as long as you were what I wanted—he was happy. He says he likes you and he likes me better when you're around." He smiled suddenly and glanced over at me, his eyes back on the road seconds later
"Man, I must be a real prick when you're not with me."

I finally breathed.

"My dad told me that Maggie's a nice girl and she deserves better than a man that's in love with somebody else." He gave me a longer look the second time. "I would have to agree."

I could barely control my excitement.

"So my family is okay, Rachel loved you and you know Jen is crazy about you too, so... they're good and even Michael was cool... I was scared the most about them, but...." He was quiet for a minute and I could only imagine what was going through his mind. "I... it's gonna be okay."

"But Dominic and—"

"Yeah, well, that's probably gonna be gone but I can't—I mean, I tried it their way. I tried to have the girl and be one of the guys and have everything be like I always wanted it but... it's no good."

I reached out for his hand and he took it instantly, lacing his fingers into mine, holding tight. We drove in silence, heading for his place, and I was happy just sitting there beside him. Content to just be with him however he wanted or would let me.

"I slept with Maggie and it was just bad," he said, his voice jarring after the long minutes of quiet. "She was into it and I could tell she was, and I just... I wasn't there. I thought I'd try... to make sure... I'm sure now," he finished, squeezing my hand before he let it go.

"But—"

"And I know I was wrong," he said, pulling over to the curb, parking the SUV in front of his building, in his spot that no one else ever parked in. He was a police officer after all.

"And I know I don't deserve another shot," he told me, unbuckling his seat belt, turning in his seat to face me. "But you gotta give me one. You know

you're supposed to belong to me."

I stared into his face and there was no realization or epiphany or anything else. It was simply the truth and I knew it because it hadn't changed. I was stuck on him. I couldn't move forward to someone else because he had my heart. No amount of logic or time or distance would change the fact that I was madly in love with Detective Sam Kage.

"If you send me away I'll just keep coming back. I want you with me all the time."

"And when were you gonna tell me all this? When was I gonna see you if I —"

"Tonight—tomorrow—I don't know, J. I would've come as soon as I got up my nerve to talk to you. It's scary to think you're gonna hear no and you're so stubborn that—"

I raked my hands through my hair. "How could it ever be no, Sam? I—"

He slipped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me forward into the kiss. My lips parted as he slanted his mouth over mine. He held me tight; his hand fisted in my hair, and he devoured my lips, biting, sucking, and hungry for me. I trembled in his arms and I heard the rumble of satisfaction as his hands ran all over me—my back, my ass, down my legs that he drew forward and wrapped around him.

When he touched my ankle, the pain shot through me and I gasped.

"Oh-oh baby, I'm sorry," he soothed me, kissing me again, his hand on my throat. "Lemme get you inside and we'll get this iced up."

"Kiss me again," I begged him, whimpering, leaning forward.

"Jesus, you should see your eyes and your mouth.... " He trailed off, staring at me. "My beautiful baby... God, I could just look at you all night."

"How 'bout you put me in your bed?"

"That too," he promised. "And I will never let you go." He leaned sideways and kissed me again, this time gently, slowly, like he had all the time in the world. "Oh yeah, you're mine." He smiled wide before he pulled me forward and hugged me tight. "I missed you."

I couldn't speak around the lump in my throat. I just laid my head on his shoulder, hugged him back, and cried. The tears just rolled from my eyes.

"Aww, babe, don't cry." He sighed, pulled back, wiping at my eyes with his fingers. "Don't move."

I watched as he got out, walked around the front of the car, and opened my door to look up at me. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

His long exhale of breath. "I'm sorry I slept with Maggie.

So sorry... please forgive me."

I nodded, reaching for him, and he lifted me down to stand in front of him.

"Did you... was there anybody—"

"No," I cut him off, my voice barely there.

"No one in your bed since me?"

"No."

The look on his face that he couldn't hide, the relief, made me smile.

"C'mon, let's go inside."

He basically tucked me next to him and supported my weight, keeping me from putting any pressure on my ankle.

He kissed me in the elevator, in front of his door, and grabbed me once we were inside his apartment. His hands on my face, he was smiling down at

me as I stood there.

"You're very happy," I observed because it was obvious.

"I feel good," he confessed, scooping me up and putting me down gently on the couch. "Lemme get you taken care of here."

I sat there and watched him drag out a machine that he filled with ice and water. There were tubes that led to a wrap that he put around my ankle. He talked while he moved around, explaining how he'd torn his meniscus tendon as well as his ACL while he was chasing some guy down an alley.

He'd gotten twisted up in a fence, having the guy's partner push him back while his foot was planted. It sounded painful, and he smiled in agreement. When I was reclined on the couch, my foot elevated on pillows, the wrap pulsing ice water around my ankle, staring at the fire he'd made, I felt really content. I had directed him in the process of making the tea and he was in the kitchen when the thundering knocking came from the front door. I thought I was going to jump right out of my skin.

"Calm down, it's all right," he soothed me, having come out of the kitchen to put both hands on my shoulders. "It's probably Dom."

And as soon as he opened the front door, Dominic shoved past him and crossed the room to me. He looked furious.

"Goddamnit, Sam, what the fuck is going on?" he roared, pointing at me.

"How'dya mean?" Sam asked, smiling at him, closing the door gently behind him.

"Don't fuck with me!"

Sam nodded, walked over, and took my hand. I couldn't stop staring at him.

"I'm keeping him, Dom. I got no choice."

"Why?"

"I—"

"No wait, don't tell me, just—are you kidding with this shit? Sammy." He was desperate suddenly and I heard it in his voice. "You can't be a cop like this. There's no way that you're gonna give it all up for a fuckin' piece of faggot ass?"

Sam dropped my hand and charged over to his friend. He grabbed his jacket tight, his knuckles white. "You don't get to say that shit in front of Jory. You wanna be gone, go—but you don't get to be here in my house and fuckin' insult him. That's not gonna happen."

They stared holes in each other before Sam shoved him back.

"You're not gay, Sam. I would've known that. There's no way I wouldn't know that."

He sighed heavily, raked his fingers through his hair.

"Listen... I tried it with you and my family and the guys and Maggie and everybody else and no Jory. It was fucked-up and I felt like shit every single day. I can't do that anymore, Dom—I can't do it just because it'll make everybody else comfortable. I can't."

He looked at Sam and then me and back to Sam. "And I can't be your partner anymore, Sammy. Not like this. I can't watch you throw away your career over some fuckin' faggot you picked up and—"

"Get out!"

"You better put in for a change of partner tomorrow, Sam!

Tomorrow!"

"Get out!"

Dominic stormed out the front door, throwing it open, letting it slam against the wall and vibrate to a half close. I watched Sam walk over and close it

gently, click the dead bolt, and then turn off the light so that only the fire and the light above the stove illuminated the room.

"I'm so sorry," I said softly. "I can—"

He walked to me, dropping to his knees beside the couch, letting me reach for him, pull him close, rest my chin in his hair.

"Sam, maybe I should—"

"It's like I thought it would be, J." He sighed deeply, clutching me tight, lifting his head to kiss my throat. "There are no surprises with him. My family was a surprise, they've been amazing. I can't expect anymore... it's enough how it is."

"But—"

He chuckled, kissed my jaw, my chin, and then my lips.

"Baby, if what I do in bed is something he cares that much about—I don't know what I can do. Would I throw away our history if the roles were reversed?" He thought a moment. "I dunno... I would hope not, but who knows? I'm not gonna sit here and pass judgment on him, be a hypocrite, 'cause it's something I might have done. I'm just gonna let him go."

"Maggie must've called him like seconds after you left her."

"Probably."

"You're not mad at her?"

"What's to be mad at? It was gonna come out sometime, it's just faster than I thought."

"And tomorrow? What happens when Dominic tells everybody about us?"

He leaned back and looked at me like I was nuts. "Are you kidding? He's not gonna tell anybody. He's just gonna let me request a partner change and

leave it at that. Me being gay isn't as bad as him not knowing and being my partner all this time. It's gonna stay quiet until I say something. He'd never say I was gay. People would think he was too."

My relief made me shiver. "Oh thank God. I can—"

"J," he said, cupping my face in his hands, smiling at me.

"I hafta tell my captain, and we'll see what happens after that. For right now, I just wanna be here with you and not think about it."

I nodded.

"Can I sit with you?"

I lost it. The tears came in a flood.

"Oh baby." His voice was like honey as he lifted me up and settled me back down so I was leaning against his chest. He draped his arm over my shoulder, gently rubbing circles over my abdomen. The other hand stroked through my hair, petting me, both movements meant to calm and soothe me.

"Don't cry, everything's gonna be okay."

"You should be losing your mind."

"Why?"

"One day you're straight and the next you're gay.... Jesus, Sam, most guys would be flippin' out. You seriously should be just freaking out."

"I've had time to work through it," he chuckled and I felt the laughter more than I heard it as he kissed my temple, at the same time running his hand over my throat, down under the collar of my sweater to touch my bare skin. "I've bounced back and forth with you enough times to know that, with you around, I'm good."

I shivered. "You know I love you, right?"

"Yes, J, I know."

I took in a deep breath and closed my eyes.

"I love you, Jory."

I could have died happy right then and there.

* * * *

We decided that, since we were at his place, he would pack a bag and we would drive to my apartment and he would leave from there in the morning. He had offered to just throw me over his back and carry me, but I was determined to get the crutches he had loaned me to work. They were slightly too big even though he had shortened them to the smallest they could go, but he assured me they were workable. So I was making my way to my building with him beside me, yawning dramatically.

"Could you stop that?" I groused at him.

"What?" he teased me.

I tried to scowl but he looked so good with the smile in his eyes, the way his lip curled up in the corner, the day-old stubble, and his hair sticking up in places. He was ruffled and tousled from being in bed with me, having proven to me that he could be careful when he made love to me. He had wrapped my legs around his waist and supported my weight in his lap without once touching my ankle. I had insisted that we consummate our back-together status, over his objections.

"I don't wanna hurt you," he said when I had slid down so my head was in his lap.

"You won't," I said, reaching up to touch his face, my fingers sliding over his jaw. "But I gotta have you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Please."

"Okay, baby," he said, his voice low and husky.

I let him ease me out of his lap and watched as he unwrapped my ankle, releasing me from the machine. He had an Ace bandage and he was methodical when he put it on, checking to make sure it wasn't too tight, massaging the cramp from my other calf, working his strong hands up both legs to my thighs. When I lifted up off the couch, my back bowed for him, he picked me up and carried me to his bed. I was pinned under him and when he kissed me, I moaned loudly.

"I wore a condom with Maggie, J, I swear I did."

I smiled up into the eyes now dark with passion. "And so what?"

"I went and got tested after and I know it doesn't show up that fast but I'm clean and—"

"And so what?" I repeated. "You just want me to let you—"

"Yes—please... let me."

I stared up into his eyes and I saw his jaw clenching, heard the shaky breath, saw the hard swallow.

"Baby, I swear I—"

"I don't trust anyone like I trust you, Sam."

The look on his face that I had never seen before, the look of love—surrender and aching and happiness all at the same time—I was so pleased with him, with the man I would spend the rest of my life with.

"I'm gonna be so gentle, baby."

"Don't be *that* gentle," I teased him.

And the kiss I got curled my toes, it went through me so fast and so hard, racing heat that made me cry out.

"The sounds you make when you're happy," he growled against my mouth.
"You kill me."

I was burned up with my desire for him and him for me.

Impossible to deny the connection between us, as tangible as it was. His skin on mine was scorching.

"Hello."

My head snapped up and I realized I had been daydreaming.

"I'm gonna grab you if you don't hurry the fuck up," he threatened me, his brows furrowing. "It's freezing out here, J."

I tried not to smile as I hobbled passed him.

"I hope you have something to eat up there, because I'm starving."

"I don't, actually. Why don't you run and get some Cuban food and meet me upstairs. Gimme the bag."

He snorted out a laugh. "Yeah right, like you can use crutches and carry a bag. I'll meet you up there. Whaddya want?"

"Just rice and some chicken is good."

"Okay," he said, leaning forward, kissing my forehead before he left.

At the stairs I realized that Sam carrying me was probably the best-case scenario. It looked like Everest instead of the two flights that it was. I was resting at the top of the first flight when I heard Sam whistling behind me.

"Need help yet?"

"Screw you, Kage."

He walked around in front of me, dropped his shoulder, and threw me over his back.

"Sam!" I complained as he did what he always did and slapped my ass hard. "Put me down. The blood is rushing to—"

"Nope," he cut me off, bouncing me on his shoulder to prove his dominance, carrying me and my crutches up the next flight of stairs. When he deposited me in front of my door, I immediately reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck to draw him down to me.

He deepened the kiss, having his way with me, completely in control. I knew he loved that I was submissive, intoxicated with wielding his power over me. It was the role he understood and why we fit together so well. The essential makeup of the man I was not asking to change. He was the dominant partner, the alpha male; I was his mate, simple as that.

"What're you thinking about?"

"Where's my food?" I teased him, hugging him tight.

He clutched me close, one hand in my hair, holding me against him, the other running up and down my back. The contented sigh was long, like he could finally breathe.

"The place is closed on Sundays. We'll have to scrounge up some food. I'll cook you something."

I grunted and he pinched my ass.

"Open the door."

When the door swung open it took me a minute to realize what I was looking at. I had only ever seen an apartment ransacked in movies. I never

imagined what it would look like in real life.

"Oh shit," Sam breathed out and his gun was in his hand before I was even aware that he was carrying one. "Stay here while I check the rest of it, J."

"No, just—" I reached for him but he slipped into the dark apartment and down the short hall to my bedroom. I leaned inside and flipped on the lights, illuminating the living room and kitchen as he came out, replacing the gun in the holster under his leather jacket. Funny that it had taken him only seconds to check the entire apartment; there was no getting around the fact that it was tiny.

"It's all clear," he told me. "Whoever was here is long gone."

I nodded, shivering hard.

He wrapped me up in his arms and pressed me against his big, hard body. "It's okay, baby, you just won't be staying here. Let's get your stuff packed up, okay?"

"No, Sam, I can't just let somebody scare me out of my—"

"Yes, you can," he said, tipping my chin up so he could look down into my eyes. "I won't allow you to be here. It's not an option. Besides, I would've been moving you in tomorrow anyway. I don't plan to sleep without you, ever."

"But, Sam, it's too soon. We need time to—"

"No, we don't, J. You aren't gettin' any time, so do whatever you hafta do in your head 'cause you live with me starting now."

"But—"

"I'm gonna pack up your shit then I'm gonna call it in. Sit down while I do that."

"Sam—"

"There," he pointed at the loveseat. "Sit down and look pretty."

"Sam—"

"It's a furnished apartment, J. What do you even have here that you'd need to move?"

"That's not the point. I—"

"I can put you in the seat if you'd prefer."

I went and sat down as he walked back to my bedroom.

"Lucky you picked me up at the pier, huh?" I asked the empty room, raising my voice so he could hear me. "What if I'd been home?"

"Yeah, well, ya weren't," he called out from the other room.

"Yeah, but what if I was?" I yelled back.

"But ya weren't!" he shouted and I could hear that he was verging on a roar. I understood where the anger came from.

He was terrified of losing me.

I was content even as I sat in the middle of my gutted apartment. He loved me. I was good.

* * * *

He ended up taking me to get a steak because he said I needed the iron. I looked pale, he told me, and so I was fed a fillet and a loaded baked potato with a Greek salad on the side. I had Key lime pie for dessert and a cappuccino and was promised all sorts of carnal pleasures when he got home. I took issue with the end of the sentence, *when he got home*, but wasn't allowed to argue with him as he tucked me into his bed with the remote for the TV and a hot cup of chamomile tea. He had to go supervise the crime scene and explain why my clothes had been removed, along with

my laptop and my books. No amount of whining or cajoling or begging was going to keep him from being there while the crime scene guys went through my place. I wanted him home with me and he wanted to know who had been in my apartment. He changed the subject by telling me how smart I had been not to buy a real bed. Now I had nothing to put into storage or sell or give away. I didn't realize until I had all my things back at Sam's that I had never put any money into the apartment.

It was a place to live and as much as I loved it, as happy as I had been to be there, it was still just a stop on the tour. My place was with Sam and his apartment felt like going home.

He was right—I belonged there.

I got a long, hot kiss before he left and he propped up my ankle and hooked me back up to the ice machine. He showed me how to turn it off after an hour and unwrap my ankle.

He'd wrapped it back up in the Ace bandage when he got home. I argued that he should stay with me and he ordered me not to open the door for anybody. Period.

"What about your mom?"

"What?" He stopped at the door to look at me, clearly annoyed.

"Can I open the door for your mom?"

"Yes," he said quickly, turning to go.

"How about Dane?"

"Oh for crissakes, Jory, you know what the fuck I mean!"

I chuckled and he shot me a look before he stalked down the hall.

"Bye!" I called out to him.

He came back and leaned down and kissed me, this time tenderly, slowly, breathing me in. When he pulled back, I leaned with him as far as I could.

"Just sit here and rest. Stop bein' a brat."

I scowled at him and he left. I heard the front door shut and then the clicking of several locks. He wasn't taking any chances. My phone rang seconds later.

"Hi." I sighed, nestling down into the bed.

"I'm gonna drive you to work in the morning and pick you up after. From now on you go nowhere without me. You understand?"

"I understand," I sighed. I loved it when he was possessive and told me what to do. Nobody else had ever cared, besides Dane. The two men in my life who—"Oh shit."

"Oh shit what?"

"I gotta tell Dane about you."

"And that's bad?"

"It's kinda bad."

"Why?"

"He thinks I'm wasting my time with you."

"I'll talk to him. Gimme his number."

"Are you kidding?"

He laughed softly. "Baby, I know you're afraid of Dane Harcourt but believe me—I'm not."

I wasn't convinced of his sanity. Not afraid of Dane?

"Okay."

He repeated the number back to me and told me to watch TV or start my novel.

"You're hysterical," I grumbled. "Just come back soon."

"I will, baby. I love you."

Words so casually spoken that tore right through me. "I love you too."

And when he hung up I closed my eyes and grabbed his pillow. It smelled like him and I was content to lie there in the warm apartment and wait for my man to come home.

* * * *

I woke up and realized the room was dark. I was under the covers and when I shifted I hit a mass of solid heat. Sam was beside me, sleeping soundly on his stomach. I rolled over, draping my good leg over the back of his thighs and read the digital display on his nightstand. It was just after four in the morning. I had no idea how long he'd been in bed, but from the chill in his legs I couldn't imagine long. He had to be exhausted. He usually slept in pajama bottoms but he was naked. I couldn't keep my hands off him.

"I'm glad you're home," I whispered before I kissed the spot between his shoulder blades.

He grunted but didn't move.

I rolled off him, onto my back, and stared at the ceiling in the darkness, trying to make my body calm down. I wanted him but he was tired and I had to kill my motor. When he shifted, turning toward me, his hand going to my abdomen, I froze under his touch. I had butterflies in my stomach along with the familiar tensing, heat was racing through me. It was his fault. I craved him.

"Why are you awake?" he asked softly, his hand sliding down my bare skin, slipping under the waistband of my sweats, inside my briefs to touch me, wrap his fingers around me.

I groaned, arching up into his hand.

"Your skin is so hot, J."

"Please," I begged him, moving, sliding in and out of his fist. "Please, baby."

He rolled off the bed and I heard him fumbling around as I pulled off my clothes, stripping naked as fast as I could. A drawer opened, there was the pop of a cap and then his hand on my thigh, dragging me forward, my bent legs resting on his arms, his lubed fingers slipping inside me gently as his other hand closed around my cock.

"You missed me."

I moaned out his name and I felt him tense before he slid deep inside my body. I wasn't prepared for the laughter that came instantly.

"Why're you—"

"You just feel so good. I'm such an idiot."

"Sam?"

He pushed in again, burying himself in me, and I cried out, clutching at him, wanting him closer, deeper, the sensations exquisite and wanted.

"God, J, why would I ever be so stupid to let you go when I love you so goddamn much, and it feels like this being in bed with you? Jesus, I'm an idiot."

I pulled him down for a kiss as my orgasm built.

"You're in love with the village idiot," he breathed against my mouth.

"You're not an idiot anymore," I assured him, my back bowed, barely breathing as I quaked and bucked under him.

I felt his hand slide over my stomach, touch the muscles clenching there.

"No, I'm not," he agreed, setting a pounding pace that brought gasps from me instead of words. "Everybody's gonna know you're mine."

Which was all I ever wanted.

"I missed you so bad."

When I moaned, he clutched me tight and I thought, just for a second, that I'd died. Surely it wasn't possible to feel that good and still be alive. He told me I needed to get used to it. He wasn't going anywhere and making love to him was going to be exhausting.

I was ready for the challenge.

Chapter Eight

He had called me and told me to wait at work for him, so I was still there at seven-thirty when he walked in and collapsed onto the overstuffed loveseat in the corner of my office. I stood there looking at him, watching as he raked his hands through his hair and slowly let his head roll to the side to look at me.

"Talk to me," I said gently, walking around my desk to sit on the edge of it.

"Jesus, what a weird day."

I was reverent because I knew what he had been up against, the end of his partnership. "It was hard, huh?"

"You could say that," he breathed out. "And you could say surreal instead if you wanted to."

I stared at him. "Can you explain that?"

Heavy sigh as he stretched out his long body, his fingers laced behind his head, his feet out in front of him. "Well, for starters, this morning I went right in to talk to my captain and ask him for a new partner, but before I could even explain why, before I can even get out a word about you, he makes a call and I have to go meet with IAD."

"What's—"

"Internal Affairs Division, they check out cops. That's their deal."

"Okay. So what'd they want with you? Surely Dom didn't tell them about —"

He shook his head. "No, baby. They weren't interested in me. They wanted to know about Dom."

I stared at him.

"Remember when you said his place was really nice... well I guess I didn't know, but it actually is. Turns out he's been on the take since like day one. He's the leak in the department. He's the one that told Roman where to find Brian. He's the one that told them where to find you."

"Oh shit."

"Oh yeah." He gave me a hint of a smile. "That little home invasion he had, you remember, you were there? Well, it turns out that that was the work of one of the guys who pays Dom off, wanting to send him a message."

"By doing what? Killing him?"

"I have no idea. I just know now, from meeting with IAD, who they were."

"Is Dom still working?"

"No, he's got put on leave pending a full-scale investigation."

"What did your captain say?"

He exhaled deeply, closing his eyes for a long minute before opening them, only to stare at the ceiling "It was so weird... I mean, he was just so thrilled I asked for a new partner today. I guess he's been telling IAD I was clean, but because of Dom they would have gone on investigating me too, but since I... it makes me look like I'm innocent and—"

"But you are."

"Yeah, but it could've been so bad. And it still is 'cause now that I'm basically on the outside and I can't talk to Dom... he's under investigation and they pulled him in so he knows, and Jesus, what a day."

"Did everyone look at you like you were a narc?"

"No. I was his partner, everybody's lookin' at me like I knew he was dirty but I was loyal to him. They figure it finally got to be too much so I requested the change, nothing else.

Everybody figures I was good for keeping his secret, just wanting out, ya know? I'm getting hero treatment."

"So where does that leave you?"

"That leaves me pretty well off. Anything Dominic says about me nobody'll believe, and tomorrow I get my new partner, Ricky de Silva. He's moving over from homicide."

"You know him?"

"I know of him and he's a good cop. We talked today and he said he's excited to work with me. I'll bring him by here tomorrow to meet you."

"Why?"

"Cause if he's got a problem I need to know right off,

'cause ya hafta be a hundred percent honest with your partner. I made the mistake of not telling Dom what was going on with me. I won't do that again."

I crossed the room and stepped between his legs. He reached up for my hand, tilting his head so he could look up into my eyes. I wanted to comfort him. "I'm sorry you—"

"And I got to have lunch with Dane."

Time stopped.

He grinned at me. "Didja hear me?"

Obviously not. "I'm sorry, what?"

He chuckled dryly. "You heard me. I had lunch with the big man."

"You did?" I croaked out as he pulled me down into his lap, my legs folded on each side of his thighs, straddling his hips.

He patted my ass before he settled his hands on my hips.

"Yes, I did, baby, and it was grueling, lemme tell you. Only for you would I sit through that shit."

"Why? What?"

"He's good, ya know? I give him credit. I might ask him to sit in next time I question a witness."

"Oh," I sympathized, cupping his face in my hands, lifting his chin up so I could bend and kiss him.

He parted his lips for me and I slipped my tongue inside his mouth, tasting him.

"God, yes," he groaned. "I so deserve this after the fuckin'

day I had."

I smiled against his mouth as he pulled back to look up at me.

"We get to have dinner with him tomorrow."

"With Dane?"

"Yep."

"I'm so sorry," I chuckled, kissing his eyes, the bridge of his nose, his brows, his cheeks, and his lips as he smiled wickedly.

"It's okay, baby." He sighed heavily. "It's a package deal. I don't get you without him, and since I'm keeping you, I gotta deal with Dane Harcourt."

"You sound so thrilled."

"He's an arrogant sonofabitch," he passed judgment. "And he's fuckin' possessive and protective and today he was just... he's so worried I'm gonna hurt you and he... he threatened me and I just felt like—"

"You wanted to kill him?"

"I wanted to thank him." He smiled up at me. "'Cause he took such good care of you."

"Awww, Sam." I kissed him again. "That was nice."

"He's gonna sell the apartment for you, J, and give you the money. He said it was yours."

"We'll see. I'll talk to him about—"

"You can get it all straightened out tomorrow."

"Why couldn't we see him tonight?"

"Tonight he's going to see Carmen. Is she hot?"

I smiled at him. "It's an opera."

He pinched my ass hard. "I know that, jerk. I'm not a total idiot."

I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around his neck, burying my face in his shoulder. "I love you."

"I know," he said, clutching me tight, his hands smoothing up and down my back. "This is the only thing that kept me going all day."

I drew back to look down into his face.

"Knowing that I'd have you at the end of it."

The words that came out of his mouth were amazing.

"You're vibrating." He smiled at me with the lopsided grin I loved, the one that short-circuited my brain.

"What?"

"Your phone, dumb-ass."

I grunted, sliding out of his lap. "Nice."

"Come back." He reached for me.

I turned away and answered. "Hello?"

"Coward."

"What?"

"Sending that poor man here alone to eat with me and discuss his intended future with you. Tsk-tsk."

"I didn't send anyone anywhere," I told Dane. "I would have gone with him."

"That would not have been advisable. It would have been impossible for me to keep my objectivity had you come along."

"Like you were objective."

"I was."

I smiled into the phone. "He says it was brutal."

"I was polite."

"You know what you think... it means everything and he—"

I—"

"You love him, I know."

"Is this where you tell me if it goes bad the next time you're not gonna be there to help me out?"

"I don't care how many times it gets screwed up, I will be there."

Everybody in my life was amazing today. "Yeah?"

"I would however like you to consider the wear and tear on your heart. You don't have to act like an idiot simply because you are one."

"That makes no sense and you're being kind of an ass right now."

He grunted.

"Dane, I—"

"Listen," he sighed. "Tomorrow the Reids are in town from Texas. I expect you, with the detective or without, to be at my apartment at seven sharp. We're having drinks and then we're going to dinner at The Dancing Bull at eight."

"Okay."

"Repeat what I said."

"Oh for crissakes, I heard what you—"

"Did you?"

"I'm not five, Dane. I heard you and I was actually paying attention."

He grunted like he didn't believe me.

"I was, drinks at seven, dinner at eight. I got it. Dancing Bull, so I know what to wear."

"Wear one of the suits I bought you at Christmas."

"I'm not a Ken doll, ya know."

He laughed at me. "Oh the hell you're not. Make sure the detective wears a suit as well."

"I will."

"Does he own a suit?"

"God, you're a snob."

"No, I just want to know what to expect."

"We'll both be properly attired," I assured him.

"Excellent."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Hey, did you get lucky the other night after the art walk?"

"That question is both crude and obnoxious."

I smiled into the phone.

"Good night," he said quickly.

"Good night."

"Well?" Sam asked when I looked over at him. "What did the great man have to say?"

"We have to have dinner with him tomorrow night."

"I already told you that."

"It won't be just us."

"I know, his birth parents. I already told you that too."

I smiled at him.

"Sounds like it'll be a blast." He smirked at me.

"You'll get introduced to someone as my partner for the first time. Are you ready for that?" I stared into his eyes and waited.

"I'm ready," he said, getting up, motioning me to him.

"Get your stuff, I wanna go."

When my courier bag was packed and I met him at the door, he took it from me and tucked it under his arm before wrapping the other around my neck, drawing me in close to him.

"I'm your guy, J. You call me whatever you want."

The man definitely knew what to say.

* * * *

As we drove through downtown I looked at the strangers walking outside my window and wondered, as I always did, about different people's lives.

"Ask you a question?"

"Of course." I yawned, turning to look at him.

"What would make you want to stay home with me instead of going out and getting laid by a different guy every night?"

I felt myself scowl.

"Don't gimme the look, just answer the question. 'Cause when I was twenty-two, J—"

"I'm twenty-three."

"Whatever. When I was twenty-three I was fuckin' wild. I used to hit the club every night, or the bar, and I never took home the same person twice."

"You were a big-time player," I passed judgment.

"Yeah, I was. I was twenty-three. You're supposed to sow wild oats so you don't try and recapture your youth when you're like fifty or whatever."

"I see."

"I have a theory that guys that go through a midlife crisis just never really got to be young the first time, ya know? Like my dad—he was insane before he met my mom but he got it all out and he never had a midlife crisis. He never had to buy a Porsche or get a divorce and date blondes the same age as his daughters. I think that comes from being crazy when you're supposed to."

"Okay."

"So my question to you is this—aren't you gonna miss going out with your friends or—"

"I can still go out with my friends," I assured him. "If you want to go dancing with me, or to the movies, or out to dinner, or come along with me for game night you can—"

you're invited. If you don't, I'm not gonna beg you. You have your friends and I have mine. They might not ever mix."

"You're still gonna go out?"

"Why not?"

"To the club to—"

"I may wanna go dancing, Sam. I enjoy it. If I wanna go and you don't wanna go with me, then I'll go alone. But I have some really good friends that get me. They know me and if I say I'm with you, they'll respect that. When you meet them, you'll understand."

He let out a deep sigh. "I just don't want you to resent me a few years down the road 'cause I kept you from doing whatever you wanted to do."

I put my hand on his thigh and he immediately covered it with his, sliding his fingers between mine. "I've been on my own a long time, Sam, and I've slept with my share of strangers. I don't wanna do that anymore. I don't need a trick, I need a home."

"Trick?"

"You know, like a one-night stand or whatever."

"Okay, and I'm a top, right?"

I looked over at him. "Are you kidding?"

"No, why?"

"Sam, what's with you and Gay 101?"

"I'm just asking because I don't know."

"Okay, for the record, you're a top."

"And that makes you what?"

"A bottom," I said like he had ridden the short bus to school.

He nodded.

"We could mix it up if you like." I grinned slyly.

"No, I don't think so. I like everything just how it is."

"Oh, I bet you do," I said, looking out the window.

"You don't?"

"Don't be an idiot." I sighed, turning to look at his profile.

"You know I'm good with us."

He kept his eyes on the road. "I know you are."

"You know I have a lot of friends that have open relationships."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning they live with someone but still sleep around."

"And?"

"And so you know... I'm not built that way."

"Good, 'cause it ain't gonna be that way. You belong to just me."

I looked away so he couldn't see me smile.

"Look at me."

I turned to find his eyes on mine. I hadn't realized he'd pulled over.

"I just want you to be sure this is what you want, J, 'cause after this we're gonna go with this bein' permanent. I mean, I've got my mind made up but you gotta be on board too."

I understood that this was how he worked. There was the wrestling with the problem, then the resolution, the yes or no on a decision, followed by the

buy-in from all parties involved.

He liked a rock-solid foundation before he moved forward.

After this, there was no going back.

"I'm on board, Sam."

He reached for me, his hand around the back of my neck, and pulled me forward to kiss me breathless. I had to push back to take in air.

The smile was wicked, very pleased with himself.

"You look very happy," I said, my voice soft so it wouldn't crack on me.

"Cause I am," he assured me, running the back of his fingers up and down my throat before suddenly settling back behind the wheel, easing the SUV back out into traffic. "Let's go eat. I'm starving."

* * * *

We ended up at a deli, where we both ordered sandwiches stacked to the sky and took them to go. He told me how frustrating it was that, in all the mess of my rifled apartment, there was not one fingerprint, piece of hair, or any other telltale piece of evidence to suggest that there had even been an intruder. Professionally done was an understatement, and when I pressed him for a guess as to who it could have been, he had nothing he wanted to share. I knew better, even in the short time we had known each other, than to push. I was going to ask some more questions about his new partner when his phone went off. I was surprised when mine rang a second later.

"Hello?"

"Jory?"

"Yeah."

"Jory, it's Jen."

"Oh." I glanced over at Sam, who was listening very intently to whoever was on the other end. "Hey, how are you?"

I had no idea you had my—"

"Jory, I need you and Sam to come to my house right now."

"Are you—"

"I'm okay, I just need some support." She was close to tears; I could hear it in her voice. "I told Mitch and he just left and... then I called Kurt and... could you just come?"

"Course," I soothed her. "We'll be right there."

"Thanks. I'll see you soon."

"Sure," I promised before she hung up on me.

"Who was that?" he asked, yawning.

"Jen," I said fast. "How 'bout you?"

"My mom," he sighed deeply. "She wants me to go to Jen's."

"Perfect." I smiled at him. "That's where Jen wants us to go too."

"We're not going." He shot me a look.

"Oh the hell we're not," I retorted, thinking he was kidding. "Jen needs us. We're so going."

"We're not and that's final," he assured me.

I nodded slowly.

* * * *

As we rolled up in front of Jen's house in La Grange, I immediately opened my door.

"Wait!" He growled at me.

I turned my head and gave him the most exasperated look I could manage.

"You know what," he pointed at me. "You're lucky I even gave in and drove your ass over here."

"Gave in?" I snapped back before I climbed down and slammed the door shut as hard as I could. I turned for the house.

"Will you wait?" he roared at me as he came around the front of the car.

I limped to the fence and leaned as he came up beside me, his hand heavy on my back.

"Jesus, you're so fuckin' stubborn."

I grunted, realizing that I should have been using the crutches. My ankle was still really sore.

"Can I help you, please?"

I shrugged and he drew my arm up over his shoulder and tucked me in against him. I was surprised when he bent and kissed my temple.

"What was that for?"

"You're a pain in the ass, J, but your heart's in the right place. And seeing you all pissed off is really cute."

I scowled up at him. "I'm not cute."

"Yeah, ya are." He kissed the bridge of my nose. "And your face gets all flushed and your nose scrunches up. It's adorable."

I rolled my eyes and decided to ignore him.

"I love you."

Which basically undid me. Righteous indignation stood no chance in the face of his warm eyes and crooked grin, the dimples that only showed when he smiled, and the way he looked at me. And his words, he killed me with his words.

"Cat got your tongue, baby?" He leaned down and kissed me, breathing me in, clutching me tight.

I clung to him and when he pulled back I could only stare up at him.

"I feel so good." He sighed deeply before he grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder.

"You know how old this is getting," I groused at him, swatting his ass.

"I like it." He shrugged, and of that I had no doubt.

When we hit the porch, the door opened and Regina Kage was standing there, framed with light from behind her.

Instead of reaching for Sam, she reached for me, taking my hand, drawing me inside the house.

"Jory, it's so good to see you."

I smiled at her as she opened her arms. It was so much better than I had ever imagined. I grabbed her so tight she squeaked and then hugged me back, smoothing her hands down the back of my hair, rubbing circles between my shoulder blades.

"Thank you for coming. Jen really needs the support."

She let me go and went to Sam, wrapping her arms around him as I limped toward the living room.

Jen was sitting on the couch with Rachel beside her.

Michael was in the opposite chair, watching football with his dad. There were sandwiches on a tray on the coffee table, along with chips and dip and paper plates. All eyes were on me as I stepped into the room.

"Come here by me," Jen said quickly, patting the space beside her.

I shed my jacket and was almost around the coffee table when Thomas stood to face me.

"Jory."

"Sir."

"Listen," he began slowly, his voice low. "You understand this is not the choice I would make for my son... but neither have I ever seen him be the way he is when you're with him.

I want to be his friend, Jory, not just his father. I can't have what I want and not give to him in return."

I couldn't stop staring at him. Sam's parents were amazing. I understood what unconditional love looked like at that moment.

"The fact that you came when Jen called you... that says a lot too. Family's important, Jory, they have to love you no matter what."

I nodded.

"Yes?"

"Yessir."

He patted my shoulder. "Good boy. Go ahead." He gestured to the couch.

I glanced over at Michael and he gave me the head tip.

"Jory."

"Michael."

"Good to see you. We missed you for the holidays." He sighed, eyes back on the TV. "Boy, did we."

"Yes, we did." Rachel smiled up at me, reaching for my hand as she stood to give me a hug. "Sammy was such an ass... I felt so sorry for that poor girl, Maggie."

"Yeah," Jen snorted out, smiling through her tears. "He was so obviously not into her."

"She was clingy and needy." Rachel shivered, giving me a final squeeze before she let me go. "I offered her a Valium."

Jen laughed before burying her face in her hands. When I sat down beside her, she turned into me and I wrapped her in my arms, holding her tight as she sobbed.

"What happened?"

"She told Mitch about her and Kurt." Rachel sighed, patting her sister's back gently. "And guess what?" She looked me in the eye. "He's been banging his accountant for the last six months."

"No way." I was stunned.

"Oh yeah, way." She shook her head. "So he was so relieved that he's giving her everything in the divorce. The house, the car, their assets... he just wants out."

"And the girls?"

"He wants joint custody, but that shouldn't be a problem."

"Then...." I drew out the word, making it a question, looking at Rachel.
"Why all this?"

"Kurt," Rachel said softly. "He's going to stay with Rita.

She forgave him and they're going to give it another chance."

"But I thought Kurt loved Jen?"

"Apparently he loves his social class more."

"I don't understand."

Jen pulled back to look up into my face. "Jory, Kurt was poor when he married Rita. He works at her father's company. He's the vice president, his father-in-law is the president. The cars and the boat and the membership at the goddamn country club are all through her. She owns him and I forgot about that. He likes traveling and expensive clothes and his gadgets and everything else that her money buys."

"Oh, sweetie," I sympathized, kissing her forehead, easing her back into my arms. "I'm so sorry."

"When push came to shove, he wanted to be rich more than he wanted to be in love."

"He was probably thinking of his kids," I assured her. "If she's that rich, I'm sure she could afford to—"

"Please, Jory," she sniffled. "His kids are away in boarding school. He doesn't even see them," she wheezed out, her tears nearly choking her. "No, it's just the money. He likes his status, he's not going back to being just like the rest of us."

"I'm so sorry, honey."

She clutched me tight.

"Jennifer."

We both looked up at Sam.

"Fuck them all. You'll find the guy for you. Just focus on your kids right now and we'll all be here for you." He motioned for her to go to him.

"C'mere."

And I was so proud of him, watching him hug the life out of his sister. The sigh that came up out of her spoke to the importance of his words: for whatever reason, what he thought and said being the mirror that she saw her reflection through. That he loved her and believed in her helping more than any other comfort.

"Thank you for coming, Jory," Rachel whispered, leaning across the small space that separated us. "It means so much."

"It's Sam that she needed." I gestured to the brother and sister hugging tight.

"Yeah," she nodded, looking me in the eye. "But when you're not around, he isn't this guy. My mom says that's what happens when you're in love; the other person brings out the very best in you."

I stared back at her.

"When you're with him, Sammy is amazing. I never had much use for him until you came with him that one Sunday. I finally got what the big deal was... and then you disappeared.

Don't disappear again, Jory."

"No, I won't."

She nodded, leaning back. "Good."

It was a nice couple of hours, Sam's family treating me like I belonged. He and Michael talked football and Thomas joined in, at ease with his sons. I promised Jen that on those weekends that the girls spent with their dad she

could come and sleep over at my place. Rachel said that she had big plans for her sister, and I said we could go dancing. I wanted her to meet Dylan and Chris. She said she was looking forward to it.

Sam took a call and afterward he said that we had to go.

All the women hugged me and the men ignored me, which I took as a good sign since they were completely engrossed with what the Packers and the Broncos were doing. They grunted a good-bye to Sam and he promised his mother that we'd be there for Sunday dinner.

"I'll bring my brother," I told her.

"Oh!" She was thrilled. "I would love that, Jory. Please do bring him."

I swore I would, even as I wondered how I would accomplish it.

"Who was on the phone?" I asked Sam when we were back in the SUV.

"Christ, we left those sandwiches in here," he grumbled, rolling down the window.

"Sam, who—"

"It smells like sauerkraut. How can you even—"

"Who was on the phone?"

He sighed heavily. "Maggie."

"Okay. What does she want?"

"She wants to talk to me."

"And so you're going to go talk to her?"

"I owe her that much, J."

"Do you?"

"I think so, yeah."

I nodded, turning to look at the street.

"Don't you think so?"

"No."

"Don't be an ass."

"I'm not."

"I'll drop you at home."

"Fine."

We didn't talk the entire way to his place, and I got out of the car the second he stopped it. I didn't even bother closing the door. I was moving as fast as I could to the front of the building when a heavy hand clamped down on my shoulder.

"Just go already."

He turned me around to face him. "Listen, Maggie's just lookin' for some closure, and I'm sure an explanation. She deserves that, J."

"Sure."

His hand went to my chin, tipping it up so he could look down into my eyes. "I'm coming home to you."

I nodded.

"Knock it off, quit bein' a brat."

I exhaled deeply as he smiled into my eyes.

"Gimme kiss."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss that I wanted him to remember while he was talking to his ex-girlfriend.

"Maybe I should come up first," he said when I finally pulled back, his voice gravelly as he spoke into my hair. The way his fingers were digging into my back, the way his lips were sliding down the side of my neck let me know that I had the reaction I was looking for.

"No," I said, looking up at him. "Go and see Maggie. Just get back as soon as you can."

He nodded, staring at my mouth. "I'll be back soon. Don't go to sleep."

I chuckled. "I won't."

He gave me a final kiss on the forehead before he darted back to the car. I smiled when he peeled out. I was almost to the door when I heard my name called. Dominic Kairov was the last person I expected to see but there he was, stepping out of the shadows by the side of the building.

"Dom? What are you doing here?" I asked as I walked over to him.

He smiled sheepishly. "I wanted to talk to Sam and tell him I was sorry about everything. I wanna see if he can forgive me."

"Of course he can," I assured him, gesturing for him to follow me inside. "C'mon, it's freezing out here. We can wait for him together."

"What'd you do to your ankle?"

I chuckled. "Racquetball with Dane."

He grunted behind me. "I guess you're not so lucky after all huh, Jory?"

"No, I think my luck only runs to out-running contract killers." I smiled.

"Maybe not."

And I had a sudden chill, as I understood that maybe being alone with Dominic Kairov was really stupid.

"I think your luck's done, Jory."

When I looked over my shoulder, he grabbed the back of my coat and his hand covered my face. I couldn't breathe and the smell was awful and then there was nothing but darkness as I felt my body turn liquid.

Chapter Nine

The rocking woke me. The room was light and then dark and the third time it illuminated I realized I was in a van. I had to work to get my mind to focus so I could figure out what was going on. The last thing I remembered was my boyfriend Sam's partner, Dominic Kairov, stepping out of the shadows next to my apartment to talk to me. He had started out by telling me that he wanted to apologize to Sam for the way he had acted. When Sam had told him that he loved me, Jory Harcourt, another man, Dominic had freaked out. So when Dominic appeared and told me that he wanted to fix things with Sam, I was so happy. I had invited him inside to wait for Sam, but when I turned my back, he grabbed me and knocked me out. Now I was his prisoner. Why I had been taken was a mystery. Sam Kage was a vice detective, and so was Dominic Kairov. As far as I knew, cops didn't kidnap people. So what the hell was going on?

I could tell from the speed that I was on a freeway, but there was no way to gauge a direction. The fact that I was freezing didn't help my focus one bit. I realized the reason was that my coat was gone. All I was wearing were my corduroys and sweater from earlier in the evening. My hands and feet were tied behind me and I was bent backward in an arch. It was uncomfortable, but not painful. I was afraid of what my ankle would feel like when I was released, since I had sprained it days earlier. Would I even be able to stand on it? And then I wondered if I *would* be released. How did kidnapping work? What could I expect? Having never been kidnapped before, I had no idea. For some reason I thought about my brother then; what would Dane say if he could see me now? It would be one more stupid mess that Jory had gotten himself into. And then I thought about Sam and how much I loved him. Funny all the things that swept through my brain.

The van stopped and I could barely breathe. The door slammed open and I was faced with Dominic and a man who looked familiar but was not instantly recognizable. He was dressed well, in a three-piece suit, topcoat, and a long scarf.

"See?" Dominic gestured at me. "You send me and the job gets done."

The other man nodded. "I do see, very good. Now I want him shot and—"

I gasped and he scowled before he turned sideways and saw what I did—Dominic holding a gun to his head. He reached for the gun at the same time it went off. There was blood everywhere, and I screamed.

"Shut the fuck up," Dominic yelled at me as two other men came to stand with him. "Toss that asshole in the ravine, but don't forget to put Jory's coat next to him."

I watched him wipe my thigh with the coat, and only then did I see that my pants were torn and I was bleeding.

"Don't worry, J, it's only a flesh wound. You're not gonna bleed to death or nothing."

So odd that he was talking to me like we were buddies. He tossed the coat to a guy wearing gloves and then slammed the door of the van shut after he got in with me. He sat down as the van started moving again.

"You're wondering why the hell you're not in the ditch too, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, 'cause I still need you to show to Roman's old man.

Once I tell him that you killed his son, he's gonna gut you, and I'm gonna get out from under all this bullshit."

I just stared at him.

"Do you have any idea how much Maggie hates Sam?"

It was a weird segue, but I went with it and shook my head.

"She hated him so much that she agreed to call him for me and get him over to her place."

I was silent, just keeping my eyes on him.

"You know, with you dead, J, Sammy's gonna go back to being the way he was. With Roman gone, all evidence of my involvement goes with him. So, see, I get my life back, my partner back—everything with just you and Roman turning up dead."

I winced and he smiled.

"Your ankle hurts, huh?"

I nodded.

"Sorry. I'll untie you when we get to the warehouse. I'll get you some blankets too. I don't want you to freeze before you see the old man." He studied me. "You know, just so you're prepared—the old man, he might not kill you fast. He's got some old-world ideas about revenge, and with you being the one that killed his kid an' all... you might be in for a long night."

I felt my stomach heave.

"I won't be around for that, J. It'll be weird though, to know for the rest of my life what happened to you and never tell Sam. He's gonna be so happy to get me back when all they find is pieces of you."

Hard not to break down, but if I did, I was afraid of what would happen. It seemed like he got off on seeing others suffer. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction... at least not until I absolutely had to.

"Sammy'll be all devastated and I'll be there to see him through it. I'll even find him a new girl."

My eyes filled instantly. It hurt my heart just thinking of Sam ever loving anyone but me.

"Faggot piece of shit," he snarled at me before he leaned forward and drew back his fist. I never even felt the punch.

* * * *

My whole body hurt. I felt cold even through two blankets because the wall I was lying beside was like a block of ice. I could hear things scuttling around in the darkness and knew it could only be rats. I tried to calm down so I wouldn't hyperventilate. I felt the rope between my hands and saw that it ran behind me to the wall. It was knotted over my head to a pulley. Looking at it, I realized I could be strung up by my wrists if someone wanted it that way. Moving my legs, I felt my ankle throb with renewed pain before I felt in my pockets for my phone. It wasn't surprising that it was missing. What kind of cop would Dominic be to miss my cell phone? I laid back down because my head was pounding and I was dizzy. I didn't want to throw up. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't faint. It didn't work.

* * * *

I was nudged awake, and when I looked up Dominic was standing over me. He had a gallon of water and a bucket.

When I lifted my head up off the floor, he squatted down and put both close to me.

"Drink this and use this to piss in." He smiled lazily. "Don't mix 'em up."

I looked at him.

"Are you hungry?"

I shook my head.

"You will be," he passed judgment. "And I have something to ask you... did Sammy meet with IAD?"

"What's IOD?" I asked deliberately.

"IAD," he corrected me. "Okay, guess not. IAD is internal affairs division, J."

Again it was funny that he was calling me J, like we were buddies, like we were just sitting around talking, not at all like the life-and-death situation it was.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah."

He chuckled. "You know, my buddy Marco says if you blow him, he'll get you some more blankets. I think ya should. It's like thirty degrees or so in here, J. I mean, we're sittin' in the office where it's warm. Down here in the warehouse, you're gonna fuckin' freeze your ass tonight."

I shook my head.

"Come on, J, think about it. You're not gonna see Sammy again anyway. He'd want ya to at least be warm." He said it like it was obvious. "And what's suckin' a little dick to a guy like you? I'm sure you've blown hundreds of guys."

"No."

"C'mon, J, I bet you give a great blow job."

"Sounds like you wanna know," I said to antagonize him. I was afraid that the way we were going I would be forced.

"Fuckin' cocksucker!" His voice went flat and cold before he stood and kicked me in the ribs.

I rolled up into a ball and saw his boot coming for my face.

I felt my head explode and then it was dark all over again.

* * * *

I was so cold. I couldn't remember ever being so cold. My teeth chattering woke me. Sitting up almost made me vomit, but I bit back the nausea, and when I moved my hand to touch my hair I realized that it was caught in something. I pulled and used my other hand to free it. Like a heavy, tight-fitting bracelet that slipped off painfully, chafing, but the recovery taking only seconds. I jerked suddenly and held up my hand in front of my face.

"Oh shit," I gasped, realizing that the rope was off my right wrist. In the cold, my hands had shrunk and the rope that had been tight wasn't any longer. It took only seconds to get it off my other hand. This, then, one of the many benefits of being a small guy—ropes and handcuffs had to be constantly tightened.

I found that I couldn't stand. Even sitting up almost made me swoon. So I crawled to the edge of the wall and moved through the darkness. The floor was covered in gravel and sand and smelled like manure. There were furry bodies moving just feet from me but I heaved silently, determined not to vomit. When I felt the blast of cold air on my face, I looked out and saw the moon-washed snow and the car. And I thought that running would be good at the same time I knew that I was already cold and outside would just be that much worse. Staying with Dominic would get me killed, but so would wading through snow in just my jeans and a sweater.

When I brushed up against a rope, heavier than the one I had been tied with, I felt up the length and there was a knot.

A foot above that, another... and then another. I couldn't follow it in the darkness, but it had to lead somewhere. It was dicey though. I could barely stand, let alone climb, and depending on how far up—I might fall.

These were decisions that I had never evaluated even in my wildest dreams. Did I climb the rope ladder or stay where I was? The decision was made, however, when I heard a heavy door slide open and a shaft of light cut through the darkness. When I looked, I saw no one in the doorway, so I rose to a hunched position and sprinted back to where the blankets were still piled next to the wall. I collapsed onto the floor hard and saw the lights in

front of my eyes. My body felt heavy and the waves of nausea pounded through me.

"Hey."

I rolled my head and dimly saw the man looming over me.

"I'm bored," he said before he grabbed me.

I tried to move but I was useless. He outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds and his weight on my chest, his knees on my arms, pinned me easily. He thumbed open the button of my corduroys and flipped me over hard, winding me.

I was shoved face down on the floor and my sweater was pushed up as my pants were yanked down. I squirmed, but the knee that was driven into my back stopped me. He grabbed a handful of the back of my hair and yanked my head up sharply before showing me the long, jagged hunting knife.

"It goes in your ass or my dick does. You decide."

I went completely still.

"Yeah, I fuckin' thought so," he said, his hand sliding across my bare skin. I felt him shift and he yanked me to my hands and knees before I heard him spit. "Gonna tear up that sweet little ass of yours."

I felt him there against me, ready and hard, felt the knife in his hand against my ribs, felt him nudge forward before he would lean back and then forward again to bury himself in me. In that instant was advantage. He was bigger, but even hurt I was sure I was faster. I dropped my left shoulder, which put him off balance, and with my left hand grabbed the blade of the knife and slipped it out of his hand. I rolled over on my back, and he couldn't stop his fall or slow his momentum. I was going to stab at him, catch him in the throat, but at the last second, I slid sideways out of the way.

There was a crunch as his face hit the floor, and I saw the spreading pool of blood around his head. The whole ordeal had lasted only seconds but felt like a lifetime. It was so quiet, and in that stillness I decided not to sit there and wait.

I pulled up my pants, grabbed one of the blankets, and bolted back across the room. Adrenaline is an amazing thing.

You go from tired and weak to Superman in seconds. With the blanket tied around my neck, I even had a cape. It was funny, I had never climbed a rope ladder in my life, but it seemed self-explanatory. You put your feet on the bottom knot, put your hands above the next knot and pulled yourself up. It was an upward crawl, like a worm. Up, down, little by little. When I heard the guy who had tried to rape me stirring, I moved faster. I watched him move to his knees, feel his face, swear, and realize I was gone. His roar was loud; it bounced off the walls, echoing in the huge space. But me he couldn't see, as I was high enough up that I was cloaked in darkness. I froze until he left, not wanting the rope to move, and then climbed faster when he ran from the room. I started to panic when I kept going up and there seemed no end, but there was suddenly a beam in front of me and I saw the shelf.

I reached for it, realized I needed to be higher, and climbed above and dropped down inside. I pulled the rope ladder up fast and sawed through it with the knife so I had the length of it in a pile beside me. I had just enough energy left to wrap the blanket around me before I passed out from exhaustion. I had never been so tired.

* * * *

It was light, the gray sky visible through the windows that I could now see from my perch. Obviously a fire or some other disaster had taken the floor that used to exist between the ground and where I was. What I was lying on was what was left of a loft. Perhaps it had once been a barn or some kind of production plant, I didn't know. I just hoped that what I was lying on would hold; it was just wooden planks that looked flimsy and creaked with the wind. I could see through the slats to the floor and I was a long way up. A

fall from this height would easily kill me. The wind outside would kill me too, and that was what Dominic was sure had happened.

I had run when Marco tried to rape me, and the wind had done away with me and all traces of my movement through the snow. It made sense. The hole in the side of the wall was big enough for me to climb through and they had searched everywhere else. Outside was the only plausible solution.

I watched them come in and out, heard Dominic yelling at Marco before the firecracker sounds outside and the silence, except for the wind. In the darkness that night, as I put the blanket between my teeth to keep them from chattering, I knew I was going to die. My only solace was that I had not been raped. I would just fall asleep and not wake up. It was almost comforting, because I ached everywhere and I had never been so thirsty in my life.

"Jory!"

I was startled awake and looked down through the slats to the floor. Dominic was standing in the middle of the floor, hands on his hips, staring up at the ceiling. I knew he couldn't see me, but I was terrified anyway.

"Jory, you fuck, I know you're in here somewhere. There's no way you got more than twenty miles from here in any direction and I've got no body so I fuckin' know you're here!"

I shivered hard.

"When I find you, I'm gonna slit your throat, you sonofabitch!"

I froze, convinced that he could hear my breathing. I tracked him with my eyes until he left. I laid my head back down and closed my eyes, letting the panic drain out of me.

In the logical part of my brain I realized that, if what Dominic had initially said was true, he still needed me to show Roman's father. I was still valuable. He wanted to find me because, without me, he was in trouble.

I didn't realize I had fainted again until I heard the tapping and it woke me up. I rolled my head and saw Dominic an instant before he broke the window out and screamed at me.

Just for a second, I was petrified. He looked like I figured the devil would. With his hair whipping around from the wind, his eyes hard, the way his face looked when he screamed at me—I thought my heart had stopped.

"Jory!" he roared and shoved his hand through the window and shot at me.

But he was across a space of at least forty feet, he was balanced on a ladder—either a huge one leaned against the side of the building or one that was built into the wall—and he was holding on. He couldn't keep still enough to fire and I crawled back against the far wall.

"Jory!" he shrieked, and I started to hyperventilate. I couldn't breathe, and even when he disappeared I kept expecting him to just suddenly appear at the edge of the loft.

That was the scariest moment of all. When there was no movement for several minutes, I put my head down. Hard to stay anxious and ready indefinitely.

* * * *

The sound was constant, like a beeping siren almost, and I had to make it stop. I rolled and there was a light in my face.

I screamed but I couldn't move; my body was done and there were not even tears to be shed.

"Jory." The voice was loud, close, as a gloved hand slid over my chest. "Don't move, Jory. Lie still. This could collapse at any second."

I squinted through the light, saw the shape of the hat, the color of the jacket. Fireman. I started to shake.

"It's okay, Jory, we're going to get you down. Just don't move."

I lay there, listening to the creaking wood, the howling wind, the sound of a chainsaw, and the hydraulic motor of something big. When I realized they were cutting their way to me, I started to shake.

"Jory!"

The yell I knew. The voice I knew. I rolled over and everyone roared at once for me not to move. Through the slats I saw a sea of people, the ground flooded with light, Dominic on his knees with three other men, uniformed officers, standing over him. Directly below me, Sam was pacing. I tried to scream his name but there was no sound; only a rasp came out of me.

"Jory; don't move!"

I felt the sway, knew I was going to fall even before the crash and the sudden sinking. That I was tethered, suddenly caught like a fly in a web, was wonderful and frightening at the same time. I wasn't sure if it would hold, and that part—

being so close to rescue but not quite, the waiting—was the scariest moment of all.

When I touched the floor, my back on top of the rubble from the splintered shelf, I finally took a breath. Suddenly there were so many faces and I was lifted so gently, moved to solid ground.

"Jory." Sam dropped to his knees beside me, his eyes red and swollen. He looked ragged. "Oh baby."

I shivered hard and everyone heard the shout at the same time.

It was a blur. Dominic was on his feet and he had a gun.

When he spun around, my only thought was for Sam.

Because there was nothing to lose; Dominic was caught and he would take his last retribution on the one he thought had abandoned him.

Dominic turned his head, panning to the right, and then came his arm with the gun in it. He didn't hesitate or speak or threaten. He did what I knew he would: aimed and fired on his best friend, his partner for half his life. The little in me that was left I used and ended up in Sam's arms.

"Jory!" Sam shrieked out but he didn't sound mad. He sounded terrified.

My head snapped up and I was staring into his wrecked eyes. "Sam."

"Oh God." His voice broke and he put his arms around me, tight.

There was heat spreading through me and it was searing and painful.

"No!" Dominic shouted from behind me, and when I turned there was a pop and he went down to his knees. There were police officers behind him and their guns were drawn.

"Don't kill him!" I screamed, but when it came out it sounded more like a whisper.

Dominic looked at me and then he turned and raised the gun.

I tensed for the impact, but Dominic was buried under a pile of policemen. I was so relieved I started to shake. If people were holding him down, he had to still be alive. I heard him swearing and let out a shallow breath before I closed my eyes. I was so tired.

"Jory—baby, please open your eyes," Sam pleaded with me. His voice cracked and I could feel him trembling. "Baby, please."

I tried to do what he asked me, I really did.

"Please baby... please...." He was crying, and I had never heard him do that before.

I was going to assure him that I would be all right, but the heat was replaced by a numbing that was followed by a chill.

It was like falling into a cold, dark well.

Chapter Ten

I shivered and opened my eyes. It was dim, but I could make out enough to see that I was in a hospital. The thing the IV hangs from, the weird lights, the nurses... I understood where I was. I heard the machine beeping next to my bed. I blinked several times to try and clear my vision, and then was rewarded when I saw him.

Sam was there on my right, his head resting on his folded arms, slouched forward in the chair, asleep on the bed.

"Oh hello, sweetie—you're awake."

I turned toward the faint, soft voice and found a smiling nurse. Her smock had little clouds all over it.

"Well, Mr. Harcourt, I'm so happy to see you."

I grimaced but she beamed back at me. I moved my fingers to get her attention and then pointed at Sam.

"What do you want, dear? Should I wake him?"

I closed my eyes for no but then opened my hand.

"Oh," she nodded, smiling wide. "I got it. I'm very good at charades, you know. It's part of the job." She lifted my hand and placed it very gently in Sam's hair. I moved my fingers and watched the copper strands twine around them.

My sigh was very deep.

"Oh, I knew this was the right one."

I was puzzled, and she read it on my face.

"This one's your partner, isn't he?"

I nodded.

"And is the architect your brother, or is the doctor?"

I held up a finger for number one. My brother, Dane Harcourt, was one of the top architects in Chicago, where we lived. He wasn't just *an* architect—he was *the* architect.

"The architect... all right then, this is making sense. He's been in and out, the architect, been adamant about your care. And the doctor—the doctor's been vigilant, I'll give you, but this one." She sighed, looking at Sam. "This one wouldn't leave your side. The others have all come and gone, but not him. He hasn't left the hospital in eight days."

My eyes widened.

"Yes, sweetheart, eight days you've been here in intensive care."

I looked back at Sam. I wanted him to wake up and hold me.

"And that man is not in good shape."

I nodded.

"Hopefully now that you're awake, he'll cry... because I don't think I can stand to look at his face another day. I have never seen such wounded-looking eyes."

I nodded again.

"Maybe we should wake him so he can go home." She smiled at me, her face hopeful. "He only eats when his mother makes him, and like I said, he hasn't left the hospital even once."

I shook my head no.

"You two must make a handsome couple."

I tried to smile.

"And you're a very lucky guy, because not only is this a man who loves you, but he is also just beautiful to look at."

She sighed. "And so is your brother, by the way. Reminds me of one of those matinee idols from the forties—not that I'm that old, mind you."

I tried to smile.

"And you, sweetheart," she smoothed my hair back from my face, "you've got to be about the prettiest boy I've ever seen."

I groaned.

"Man," she corrected herself, smiling warmly. "I meant man."

I rolled my eyes and she chuckled.

"I'm going to call your doctor now that you're awake so we can get this show on the road."

Alone with Sam, I tried for a minute to say his name before I gave up and fell asleep.

* * * *

I woke up, and after I focused a minute, saw Nick Sullivan.

Funny that he was there, a man I had been on two dates with, a man who was barely my friend. I had set him up on a blind date that went very well. He should have been with his new love interest, not keeping vigil over me. He was standing beside the bed looking down at me, arms folded across his chest and looking oddly uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, and my voice was scratchy.

He swallowed hard and continued to stare at me.

"Nick?"

He took a deep breath and looked me up and down. There were tubes and cords, there was the monitor clipped to my middle finger. "I want to hold you, but I'm not sure how."

Hold me? "Are you all right?"

"No, I don't think so. I just want to be close to you."

I tried to smile because that wasn't what I wanted. I went for diversion instead. "May I please have a drink of water?"

He jumped to do it for me.

"Jory."

I turned and saw Sam coming toward the bed. I tried to shift, to sit up.

"No-no, don't move," he ordered, reaching the bed. He leaned down toward me, lifted my right hand, and then put it on his back. His arms slid around me gently, but tight enough so I could feel the warmth of him through his T-shirt. Gently, slowly, he maneuvered under everything so he had his head on my chest as he stretched out beside me. I had no idea how he did it, as big as he was, all six-foot-four of him, but he managed. He felt so good next to me and he smelled like soap and his hair was damp. I made a noise that was half-whimper, half-sigh. I was so content. I kissed his forehead and stroked his hair. I didn't remember closing my eyes.

* * * *

The voices were muffled and soft but I heard them.

"I don't understand," her voice rose suddenly.

"Mom, don't wake him up."

"Maybe he should wake up, Sam. Maybe if you looked in his eyes, you wouldn't be able to leave."

"I'm leaving because of him. If I looked in his eyes, it wouldn't make any difference."

"You're a coward."

"Mom."

"You are! You're running away because you don't want people to know you sleep with a man! That's the only reason you're doing this."

"No, it's not. You haven't been listening."

"Sam." She drew in a breath. "You tell me you love him in the same breath that you tell me you're going away. How else do I interpret that but as cowardice?"

"You don't understand... I can't work like this! I can't be like this."

"Like what, Sam? You're not telling me anything."

"Mom." I heard the chair shift on the floor, scrape across it like nails on a chalkboard. "My life is under a microscope. If anyone finds out that I was seeing Jory while there was an investigation going on... if IAD actually looks at me, I'm dead.

Do you even get how deep the hole is that I'm in? Do you have any idea?"

"Sam—"

"It won't stop with being thrown off the force. I could be charged with interfering in an ongoing investigation. I could...

there's just so much that could go wrong. They could even throw me in jail."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Only because you're not familiar with the law. I screwed up big... you have no idea."

"Sam—"

"But Mom... if I go away, do what my captain wants and join the task force and go undercover..." I heard him let out a shaky breath, then drag in another. "Everybody knows what I did, and everybody's deliberately ignoring it. They're all concentrating on Dominic instead. I'm so lucky—you have no idea how much. They're giving me an out, and I gotta take it."

I tried to speak, to yell, to scream, but there was nothing; I couldn't even get my eyes to open. There was no way to move or reach out. I felt like I was encased in cotton.

"But you love Jory."

"I do love Jory, but what use will I be to him if I resent him for not letting me be a cop anymore?"

"Sam—"

"Mom," he groaned. "I've got to help find the man responsible for putting the contract on Jory's life. If we don't find—"

"You're lying to yourself, Sam, if you think you're doing this for Jory. You being with him will keep him plenty safe."

You want to distance yourself to make it look like you're not in love with him right now." Her voice cracked before I heard the whimper of impending tears. "You—"

"Mom, I have to go. And yeah, some of it is because I'm too close and I can't protect him when I feel like this. I mean, all I can think of is losing him and how I would feel if that happened. When he was bleeding and I

was holding him and... Jesus, there's no way to remain objective through that."

I felt the tears slipping down my cheeks, but no one saw me. They were talking about me, but no one was actually looking at me.

"I can't let anything happen to him, Mom. I dunno what I'd do."

"He took a bullet for you, Sam. He loves you so much that he would give his life for yours. I could never ask for any more for you, for any of my children... your father feels the same."

"Mom, this is about taking the information that Dominic is giving us and using it to bust a huge drug syndicate. I—"

"It's about Jory, and you not wanting people to know that you've been sleeping with him since you met."

"It's not. I already told you it's not."

"I don't believe you."

"Jesus, Mom, don't—"

"Shut up!" she yelled suddenly. "Just tell me this—when you return, can you be with Jory?"

"Yes."

"And how long will you be undercover?"

"I don't know."

"You won't see him before you go?"

"I'm here now."

"But—"

"I'm leaving right now."

"Sam." She started crying. "Please don't go."

If I could have screamed I would have. How could he leave me?

"Mom, if I go, I get to keep my job and I get to keep Jory off everyone's radar. He's gonna be better off without me, just for a few months. We need to let everything settle down."

"I want you to say good-bye to Jory."

"I did. I sat with him for an hour this morning watching him sleep. It's better that he sleeps."

"Oh, Sam."

"Mom," he soothed her.

"And what if it's a long time, Sam? What if... what if Jory finds someone else to love?"

"I can only do what I think is right, and I think this is right for the both of us. He loves me because of who I am, and if I can't be that guy... what's the point anyway?"

I felt my body heave. How could he leave me?

His lips were suddenly on my forehead. "I love you, baby."

But he didn't. Not really. How could he leave me if he loved me?

"I'll be back for you."

I tried to lift up but already I was sinking instead, the darkness pulling at me.

"I'll see ya soon."

But even before I was swallowed in sleep I knew it was a lie. There was no way of knowing when or where I would lay eyes on Sam Kage again.

* * * *

End of Book Two